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(ICIS)

December 1999

Panel 6 Making Information Systems Research More Relevant: Academic and Industry Perspectives

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Recommended Citation

Lyytinen, Kalle; Grover, Varun; Linder, Jane; Mendelson, Haim; Senn, James; and Sviokla, John, "Panel 6 Making Information Systems Research More Relevant: Academic and Industry Perspectives" (1999). *ICIS 1999 Proceedings*. 70.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis1999/70>

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PANEL 6

MAKING INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH MORE RELEVANT: ACADEMIC AND INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES

Chair: Kalle Lyytinen, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Panelists: Varun Grover, University of South Carolina, U.S.A.
Jane Linder, Andersen Consulting, U.S.A.
Haim Mendelson, Stanford University, U.S.A.
James Senn, Georgia State University, U.S.A.
John Sviokla, Diamond Technology Partners, U.S.A.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research relevance is becoming an increasingly important issue in the IS field. As an indicator of the level of concern, the March 1999 issue of *MIS Quarterly* had an article (Benbasat and Zmud 1999) on the topic by two leading IS researchers. It also included four responses and commentaries on this article from other well-known figures including the moderator of this panel (Lyytinen 1999).

The following considerations provide the rationale for the panel:

1. **Much IS research is not valued by practitioners.** Senn (1998, p. 23) quotes an IS executive who described IS research as “not relevant, readable, or reachable.” Robey and Markus (1998, p. 8) indicate that, “From a practitioner’s perspective, academic writings are literally unreadable.” Benbasat and Zmud (1999) report that non-academic subscriptions to *MIS Quarterly* declined by more than 60% after the subscription was unbundled from membership in the Society of Information Management.
2. **This lack of relevance represents a significant problem, which IS academia can not safely ignore.** Robey and Markus (1998, pp. 7-8) warn about “the implications for the academic community, such as the reduction of its credibility and withdrawal of financial support for our educational and research activities.”
3. **Relevant research complements the teaching mission of the university.** The more relevant research is to organizational concerns, the more likely the findings will be of interest to students and of value to their careers.

To discuss the relevancy issue from the perspective of key stakeholders, this panel includes IS academics and industry representatives. The IS academics will offer presentations on aspects of relevance, and propose approaches to making IS research more relevant. The industry representatives (who also possess earned doctorates and university level teaching experience) will introduce concerns about relevance from an industry perspective and provide feedback on the proposals by the academics.

2. ACADEMIC REPRESENTATIVES

The following three academics will present their views in the first 35 minutes of the panel. Based on their previous research related to relevance, they will offer valuable contributions through presentations on the topics identified below. Note that each panelist's research is based on a different methodological perspective and thus their presentations will be complementary and will generate synergies in illuminating the issues.

Haim Mendelson: How different are the information technology industries from industries that are not central to the IS field and what are the implications for producing relevant IS research?

Mendelson coauthored a paper (Mendelson and Pillai 1998) that established a metric (“clockspeed”) of the rate of change in the business environments of various industries. Their economic research analyses provide objective quantification of the much more rapid clockspeed in the IT industries. Mendelson will discuss the implications of this rapid rate of change for types and methods of research that will be most relevant to practitioners.

Mendelson is the James Irvin Miller Professor of Information Systems at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. He has published over 70 articles in journals in the fields of IS, economics, finance, and operations research. He is coauthor of *Survival of the Smartest: A Management Roadmap to the New Economy* (Wiley, 1999).

Varun Grover: How important is relevance in IS research? How does this compare to other disciplines? How can we improve our focus on topics that are relevant to practitioners?

Grover coauthored a paper (Grover and Sabherwal 1989) that included statistical analyses of the topics on which IS researchers were publishing. The analyses demonstrated that IS research did not match up well with practitioners’ interests. The analyses also showed that the research did not adjust very well to shifts in practitioners’ interests over time. In the context of the clockspeed issues raised by Mendelson, Grover will discuss the importance of relevance and specific ways of identifying topics that will be more relevant to practitioners.

Grover is a Professor of Information Systems and the Business Partnership Foundation Fellow in the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. He was recognized as one of the two most productive IS researcher from 1991 to 1997 based on pages published in the top six IS journals (see http://dsi.gsu.edu/newsletter/vol29/29_5/res29_5.pdf). He is coauthor of *Process Think: Winning Perspectives for Business Change in the Information Age* (Idea Group, 1999).

James Senn: In what situations is relevance more important than rigor and vice versa? Is rigor a non-negotiable absolute, or is it a dimension that should be manipulated when necessary to deal with rapidly developing issues?

Senn has conducted qualitative research including structured interviews with CIOs and other IS professionals. He found some very negative practitioner attitudes about the irrelevance of IS research (Senn 1998). In the context of the preceding presentations by Mendelson and Grover, Senn will discuss the tradeoffs between relevance and rigor in relation to issues that are important to IS professionals.

Senn is a Professor in the Department of Computer Information Systems at Georgia State University. He speaks and consults extensively on business strategies, innovation, and the management of information technology. Senn interacts with businesses locally and internationally and writes a continuing column about business strategy. He is the author of several books on management and information systems.

3. INDUSTRY DISCUSSANTS

Two practitioners will introduce their concerns, raise questions, and comment on the viability of the proposals by the academics. This discussion will occupy approximately 20 minutes following the academic presentations. These industry discussants have IS

research experience in consulting firms. They also have doctorates, university level teaching experience, and publications in academic journals, so their comments will reflect a realistic understanding of the characteristics of the academic system.

The following practitioners will provide feedback on the presentations by academic representatives, and offer their thoughts on the issue of relevance:

Jane C. Linder is Associate Director of the Institute for Strategic Change at Andersen Consulting. She conducts research and advises clients on leadership issues related to turning ideas into business results. Linder was director of demand/supply planning in the worldwide logistics organization at Polaroid. She has an MBA and DBA from Harvard Business School and taught there before going into industry. Linder won the Best Dissertation award at the ICIS conference in 1989.

John J. Sviokla is a partner at Diamond Technology Partners, which counsels senior executives in the strategic use of IT to exploit opportunities in electronic commerce and other business situations. Prior to joining Diamond, he was an Associate Professor and the Baxter Fellow in Information Technology at Harvard Business School. Sviokla has authored several books and also has papers in leading academic publications. He was a founding member of the editorial board of *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* and has also served as an associate editor of *Organization Science*.

4. MODERATOR

Kalle Lyytinen will moderate this panel. He is a Professor of Computer Science in the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. He is a Senior Editor of *MIS Quarterly* and on the Editorial Board of *Information Systems Research* and other IS journals. He has published over 70 articles, including a commentary on relevance (Lyytinen 1999), and edited or written six books.

Lyytinen will introduce the panelists and each presentation. After the academic presentations, he will introduce the discussion portion of the panel. The industry representatives will bring additional aspects of relevance into a dialogue with the academics. Lyytinen will ask questions where appropriate to enhance the interaction and encourage the panelists to expand on key points. Following discussion of the issues by the academic and industry representatives, he will solicit questions and comments from the audience to further expand on the issues and suggestions from the panelists. This audience participation will occupy the last 30 to 35 minutes of the session.

The discussion portion of the panel could include issues such as:

- speeding up the journal publishing process and increasing accessibility to materials prior to publication in hard copy;
- increasing the relative importance of publishing in practitioner-oriented outlets, including books, for IS faculty evaluations;
- increasing the relative importance of technical skills and involvement with industry for IS faculty evaluations;
- weaknesses of academic IS programs, as seen by industry representatives;
- increasing industry involvement with IS academic programs, including providing inputs that will meaningfully influence the direction of these programs;
- increasing the focus of IS research on topics and research models where we are most likely, in the context of the strengths and weaknesses of the academic environment, to make relevant contributions to practice.

5. REFERENCES

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