

1993

# PANEL 8 THE RIGHT RESEARCH TASK: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE TRADEOFFS OF EXPERIMENTAL TASK DIVERSITY IN IS RESEARCH

Bradley C. Wheeler  
*University of Maryland at College Park*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis1993>

---

## Recommended Citation

Wheeler, Bradley C., "PANEL 8 THE RIGHT RESEARCH TASK: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE TRADEOFFS OF EXPERIMENTAL TASK DIVERSITY IN IS RESEARCH" (1993). *ICIS 1993 Proceedings*. 29.  
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/icis1993/29>

This material is brought to you by the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in ICIS 1993 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact [elibrary@aisnet.org](mailto:elibrary@aisnet.org).

## PANEL 8

### **THE *RIGHT* RESEARCH TASK: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE TRADEOFFS OF EXPERIMENTAL TASK DIVERSITY IN IS RESEARCH**

**Panel Chair:**<sup>1</sup> Bradley C. Wheeler, University of Maryland at College Park

**Panelists:** Izak Benbasat, University of British Columbia  
Nancy P. Melone, Carnegie Mellon University  
K. S. Raman, National University of Singapore

The objective of this panel is to discuss the critical issues of experimental tasks in information systems (IS) research. Creating or selecting an experimental task presents a troubling dilemma for information systems researchers and the IS community as a whole. The utility of our research is severely limited when our tasks are unrepresentative of real world problems or contain systematic biases toward some cultures or genders. Yet, broad diversity in task selection may impede the development of a coherent body of knowledge. This represents an important, and all too often, overlooked problem for research in the area of technology design and assessment.

Specifically, the task confronting a computer user has proven to be a chief moderator of how systems are used. Both the generators and consumers of experimental IS research have often criticized the field for our selection of research tasks. The criticisms suggest that our experimental tasks have

- lacked meaningful context relative to the subject populations,
- been biased toward certain genders and cultures,
- been too simple or excessively complex,
- been ill-suited to the research question,
- lacked proper experimental control or been unrepresentative of how systems are really used in organizations,
- lacked meaningful measures of assessing performance,
- not facilitated useful comparison between studies and across research streams.

Are these criticisms valid? If they are, how should they guide our interpretation of past research and shape our selection of tasks for the future?

One response has been to use "classic" tasks that are common across many studies. For example, SA&D research has often used a task of searching for a known set of errors. Much GSS research has used a value-based task, such as the foundation task, or an intellectual task, such as the campus parking problem. Another response is to use a more diverse mix of tasks.

Researchers must make tradeoffs when selecting or developing an experimental task. The critical choices made at these tradeoffs pose serious implications for the long-term development of the IS field.

The panelists will address these criticisms and tradeoffs in the following manner. Each panelist will identify what she or he sees as the critical issues for selecting or creating experimental tasks.

Nancy Melone will argue that critical issues must balance contextual realism with experimental control.

---

<sup>1</sup>Brian E. Mennecke, East Carolina University, coauthored the development of this panel.

Izak Benbasat will contend that control and uniformity across multiple studies is a critical issue if the field of IS research is to build a coherent body of knowledge.

K. S. Raman will argue that task diversity is a critical issue if we wish to avoid sowing systematic biases in the field's evolving body of knowledge.

As panel chair, Brad Wheeler will frame the task dilemma and will moderate the discussion. The audience will be encouraged to ask questions and suggest other critical issues which are important for experimental tasks.

Attendees will benefit by gaining a better understanding of the critical issues in experimental task design and selection. The panel's discussion should also help scholars to understand the tradeoffs associated with experimental tasks when they assess streams of experimental IS research.