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## The Behavioral Tourist: Reflections on a Journey to the Land of IS

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**THE BEHAVIORAL TOURIST: REFLECTIONS  
ON A JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF IS**

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**PROFESSIONAL**

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# THE BEHAVIORAL TOURIST: REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF IS

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## ABSTRACT

A business school professor of Organizational Behavior travels on sabbatical to a school of Information Science in order to take courses in IS/IT and learn more about their intersection with OB and Organization Theory. This article offers his irreverent and amusing story of his journey, but with a serious point. He concludes that it is time for IS academics to stop asking themselves questions about the practicality of their discipline, about whether or not they have a coherent paradigm, and indeed whether or not they are a science at all, and just get on with their work. And that work is studying and writing about the organizational use of information systems and information technology.

**Keywords:** IS paradigm, relevance, future directions of IS

## INTRODUCTION

*“Information is the resolution of uncertainty” Claude E. Shannon*

*“All management is information management” Paul.A. Strassman*

*“IT is what we make business with” Bo Dahlbom*

These introductory quotes summarize my thinking on the field of Information Systems and Information Technology (IS/IT). The first, by Claude E. Shannon from his 1948 Master’s Dissertation (in Sloane and Wyner, 1993), called by many the most important Master’s thesis ever written, illustrates that

IS/IT has its foundation in the science of information and its link to decision making. The second, by Paul Strassman (1995) furthers the connection, that decision making and the management of information are what management is all about. Therefore, the field of IS/IT is concerned with business and the management of business. It has a practical application that goes beyond studying information for its own sake. The final quote by Bo Dahlbom (2000) adds the final piece to the puzzle by connecting Information Systems and Management to Information Technology. The management of businesses, the decisions that are made with the support of Information Systems can only be done with an underlying technological infrastructure of machines and communications, that of Information Technology.

I came to read these papers and to form my understanding of the IS/IT field when I decided to take a sabbatical from the University of Alberta's School of Business, where I study leadership and teach organizational behavior, and visit the School of Information Science at Claremont Graduate University. Thus, I am a behavioral tourist, but not an accidental one. My doctorate is in Organizational Behavior from a Faculty of Management. This fact will be important to know later, when I discuss the core disciplines that serve as foundations for business schools. My sabbatical visit was to the land of IS, not the land of OZ, though here again I will make comparisons between the two. Dorothy and her dog Toto were swept away by a tornado to the beautiful and culturally different land of OZ where she encountered companions in her quest to find the Wizard and make her return to Kansas. In my case I left all I knew behind, even my dog, and landed in Claremont California – which when compared to Edmonton was in some ways like going from black and white to color. Fortunately my landing didn't squash the Wicked Witch of the West.

So what did I hear about IS, and MIS, in those first days as a visitor? One theme that surfaced a number of times was about how new is the discipline of IS. There seemed to be a constant reference to the growing pains of the area,

almost like adolescent angst. But IS has been around for a while. In 1967 Gordon Davis and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota initiated the first academic degree programs in management information. The first IS text is likely his *Computer Data Processing*, published by McGraw-Hill Book Company in 1969. In 1975 at McMaster University I was an MBA student and took a General Purpose Simulation Systems course from Dick Welke (now at Georgia State) while he was getting his PhD in IS from SUNY – Buffalo. Now, maybe the field of Organizational Behavior (OB) is a bit older, but not by that much. My mentor at the University of Toronto's PhD program, Bob House, used to joke that this PhD in OB and his obsolescence finished in a dead heat. He was trained in the field of management principles, a list of how to's for management. But in 1960 after the Ford Foundation's Gordon-Howell report and the Carnegie Corporation's Pierson report were published in 1959, business schools changed. The two studies called for business curricula to include more social and behavioral sciences and provided the funding and intellectual impetus for business schools to become more science based. Bob House had to teach himself the new discipline of OB because all that he had learned was thrown out the window. So the birthdate of OB can be set at 1959, not that much earlier than the IS birthdate of the mid-1960's.

The question that remains, then, is why do professors of OB not talk about the youthfulness of their discipline while those in IS do? In the mid-1960s business schools had to turn to the core disciplines of economics, psychology, sociology, political science, and quantitative methods for the professors that would turn their schools into the science-based faculties they are today. It took time to turn programs around, to redevelop undergraduate and MBA curricula, and finally to implement new PhD programs that would eventually graduate the next generation of professors in *business*. At the University of Toronto, where I graduated in 1981, the first doctoral students in OB were admitted in 1973 and the first student graduated in 1978. Until business schools came to have large numbers of degree holders from business programs, there was some feeling of

uncertainty that what was being done in the business school was somehow “not like what we used to do in the old core discipline”. After all, professors with a Psychology PhD were teaching in the business school and it was more applied and yet seemingly less rigorous than the old days in the Psych Department. But that of course was the point. Business schools were created, then recreated, to be a new discipline that blended old core areas into something new. They were something that was also a science and yet different from the foundational areas. the role of is in the business school

### **THE ROLE OF IS IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL**

So how does this apply to today’s IS? It seems to me that Information Science is founded on the business school core disciplines of Accounting, Economics and Finance, Marketing, and the Behavioral Sciences of OB, Organization Theory (OT), Human Resources (HR), and Organization Development (OD) (Fig. 1). From Accounting comes theory about the value of information that is timely, accurate, and relevant. From Finance and Business Economics the theory of the firm, the resource based view of the firm, and the value of investments. Marketing provides ideas of branding and customer service. Organizational sub-disciplines supply theories of strategy, the value chain, change, and organization development.

Business schools separate these areas into functions and hire for and teach them separately. But IS uses ideas from all to create a new field that is integrative. And to this mix the IS area adds the foundational areas for IT – those of Computer Engineering and Telecommunications and Computer Science. It is to be expected that professors who were taught in business schools or in a precursor foundation discipline will express doubts about the maturity of the IS field. It is only the next generation of IS professors, those who will graduate from IS departments or schools, that will come to see IS as the blend of disciplinary areas that it is.

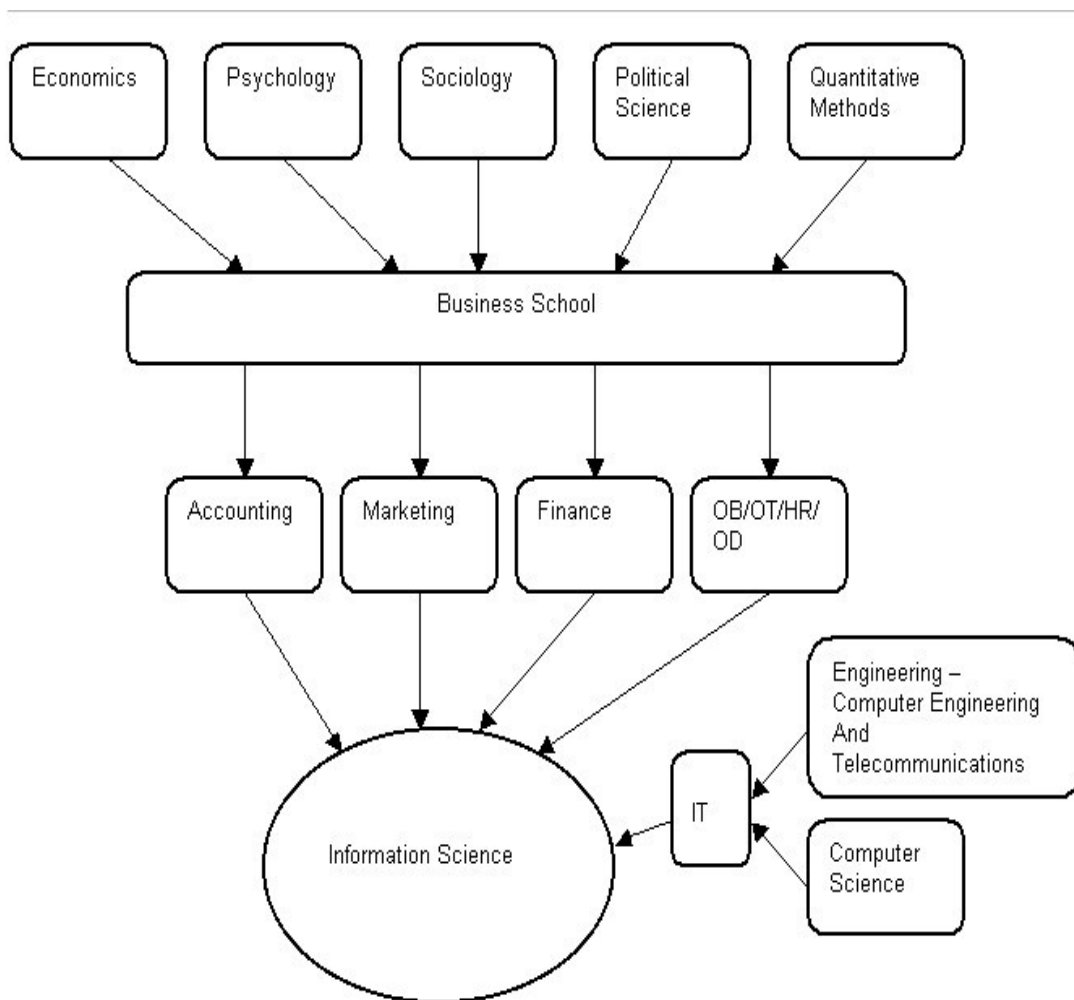


Figure 1. The Position of Information Science in the Business School

### IS INFORMATION SYSTEMS A SCIENCE?

The doubts about IS seem to be expressed in the following questions: Is Information Systems a science, does it have a shared paradigm (Kuhn, 1970), is it an applied science, is it a behavioral science, is it a business discipline? The answer in each case is yes. Information Systems is a science because it relies on the epistemology of its underlying sciences. It has a shared paradigm

because it is an amalgam of the business school disciplines. Think of the degree to which business economics and organizational behavior share a paradigm, yet they are both part of business schools. It seems to me that any variation in the paradigm in IS is smaller than the variations between business school disciplines. Information Systems is doing more than borrowing theories from the other disciplines, it is using them to build a wider understanding of how Information Systems work in organizations. It is applied because it seeks knowledge about issues that can make a difference in the near future. It is not as concerned with the “pure” search for knowledge for its own sake. It is a behavioral science because it is focused on issues of technological implementation and change. And it is a business discipline because the focus of study is on organizations in the wider business community, including those for profit, government, and not-for-profit.

## **IS OR MIS?**

Should the field be IS or MIS? The organizational behavior perspective of examining human behavior in organizations without necessarily taking a prescriptive stance shapes my own thinking that the “M” for Management should be removed from MIS. Allen Lee (1999) takes the position that MIS would not exist except for the practical side of MIS practitioners. He states that MIS researchers want to help those working in MIS do better. In the same edited book by Currie and Galliers, M. Lynne Markus (1999) argues that the traditional focus of IS on the user organization’s managers is misplaced. She makes the point that looking at Academic Information Systems, where Academic implies that IS is studied in a scientific way, means that AIS won’t rely on the continued existence of MIS departments in business organizations. Robert Tricker, also writing in the Currie and Galliers 1999 volume, goes further and makes the point that IS should study what people need to know to live successful lives, build effective organizations, and create worthwhile societies. Writing for the National Research Council of the United States, John King and Ken Kraemer (1998) took a similar



view in concluding that IS researchers should see what they are doing as social studies of computing and communication technologies.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR IS**

How should the study of IS proceed? The areas to be examined should not be unduly delimited, thus allowing IS researchers to work within Tricker's broad framework. As shown in Figure 2, Swanson and Ramiller (1993) provide a useful chart of the links between the major thematic areas of IS research. These areas are:

• Information and Interface	• Computer Supported Cooperative Work
• Introduction and Impact	• Users
• Systems Projects	• Evaluation and Control
• Economics and Strategy	• Decision Support & Knowledge-Based Systems

The research methods to be used include the full range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Each has its strengths in particular circumstances. The number and variety of IS journals has grown to the point that a researcher can find a sympathetic audience to any given research approach. Critical perspectives, especially valued in European circles, should not be ignored. Iivari and Lyytinen (1999) cite Hedberg (1980) that as long as managerial perspectives dominate the (M)IS research approach, the answers found will have a managerial point of view. They go on to state that the problem with the managerial perspective is that it assumes the primacy of planning and control and therefore sustains a system of power relations. The alternative views of evolutionary approaches and bricolage are therefore neglected. This argument has also been made on the other side of the Atlantic by King and Kraemer (1998) that a critical stance towards IS should be taken.

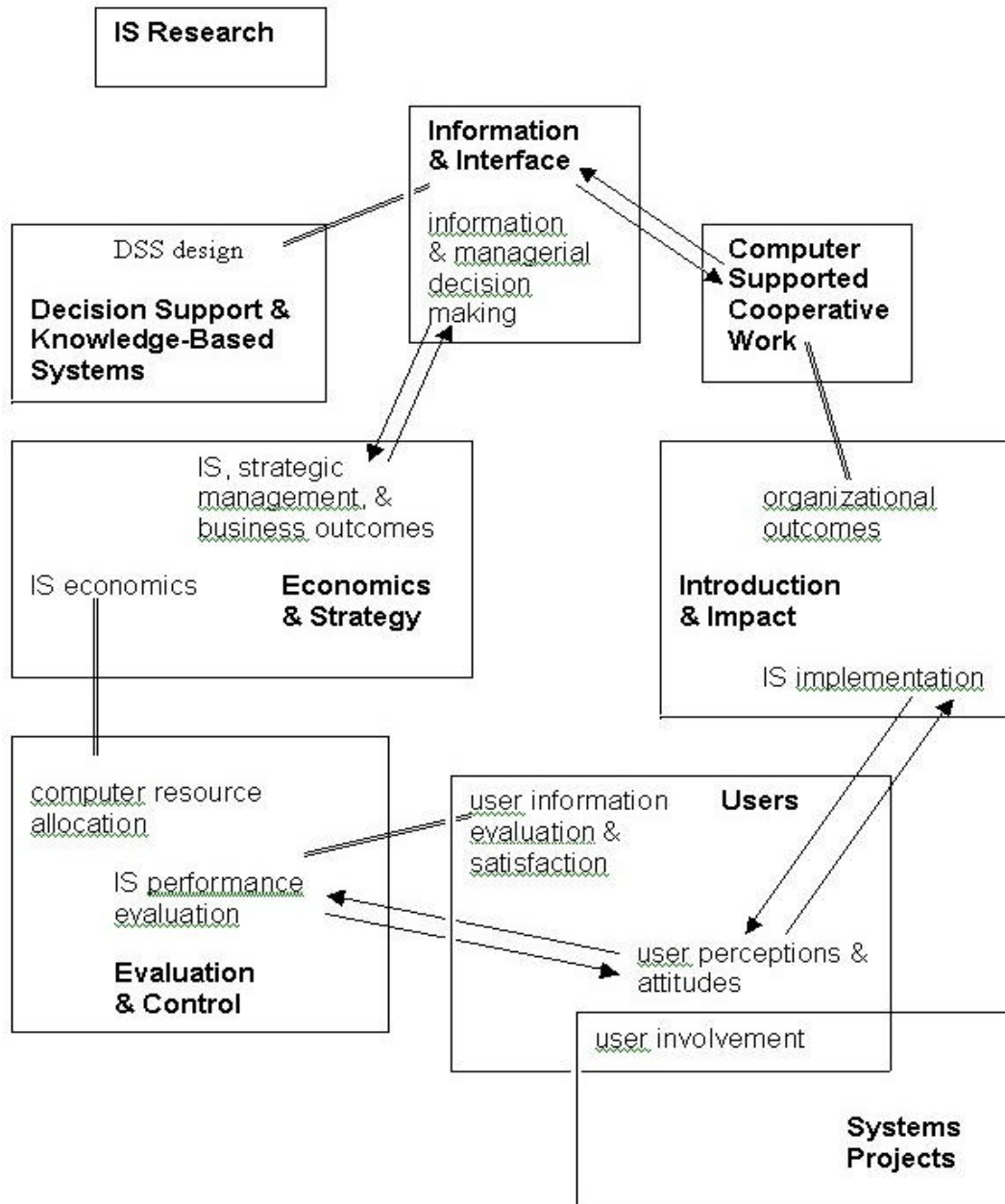


Figure 2. Swanson and Ramiller's (1993) Framework

## RELEVANCE

Another question raised about IS research is its relevance (Westfall, 1999; see also the entire Volume 6 of CAIS). This question is a further indication of the uncertainty in IS about the state of the discipline. My argument here is that the more relevance is chased, the more IS researchers spin in a circle, ending up in

effect chasing their own tails. Relevance is an outcome not an input. Thinking about adding relevance to research puts the cart before the horse because no one can know in advance what will be important, meaningful, or relevant. There are many examples from mathematics, physics, and chemistry of work that was done in those fields that was considered as pure research at its time, or unimportant research, or irrelevant research, that were later found to be practical, relevant, and important (Kuhn 1970).

Academics in business schools generally, in organizational behavior in particular, and in IS, see people in the business world doing new things, coming up with new organizational forms and ideas. Because the connection to practice is so proximate the implication is that surely, there is relevance. Consultants work with organizational members to accomplish projects and teach new ideas. They too are in the field, applying concepts to the real world and looking to make a positive contribution in the near term. Academics seem, by comparison, to be outside the action, working alone in their ivory towers, somehow laughable for their lack of day-to-day connection with the world of practice. But academics form one side of an equilateral triangle with consultants and practitioners.

IS professors are first and foremost the teachers of the future consultants, practitioners, and academics. IS professors produce the flow that sustains the system. While it is true that corporate universities exist and that consultants engage in teaching, usually executive education, without IS professors working in traditional public and private universities, the system of knowledge transfer that has been created would grind to a halt. Practitioners are too caught up in their daily issues and problems to create a system of formally educating the future professionals they need to staff their departments. Consultants need to make a profit from everything they do and are often constrained in how they think and approach problems by their company's copyrighted methods and systems. It is only the academics who have the time and the mission to educate newcomers to the field of IS.

Like consultants and practitioners, IS academics think and write about IS, but they do it to a greater degree. They innovate at times, but they also test and critique the practices of consultants and those active in the workplace. Academics have the time to think, study, and write. Consultants bridge the gap between the academics and the practitioners. The system would not work without all three components. The boundaries between them are not only fuzzy but permeable. Today's academic may be tomorrow's consultant or practitioner, and vice-versa.

Is the field of IS relevant? How can it *not* be relevant! There are thousands of IS academics around the world who, in aggregate, produce most of the literature in tens of journals and give most of the presentations at the many IS conferences held worldwide every year. Almost any paper or piece of research, on its own, may be seen to tend toward irrelevance. It is always easy to hold up one particular paper and note with derision how it is ill conceived, poorly written, or without obvious practical implications. But cumulatively the body of work moves forward. Every piece of research published must be relevant because we know that the system works. As time goes by, knowledge is created and transmitted and organizations have better tools and systems.

And every now and then the academic group produces something that revolutionizes business. Wade Rowland (1997) said of the telegraph that "once it became possible to communicate instantly from one coast to the other, it became necessary for business to do so" (p. 57). The Internet is the same. It was invented by academics for their use, expanded by universities, and only later given over to the business community. Now that the Internet exists, it is necessary for business to use it.

The field of Organizational Behavior experienced its own crisis of relevance. Some responses were to create practitioner journals like the Academy of Management Executive, and to encourage academics to summarize their

research in accessible language and publish in existing management outlets like the *Harvard Business Review*, the *California Management Review*, *Organizational Dynamics*, *Business Horizons*, and the MIT – *Sloan Management Review*. Business schools that make relevance part of their mission also exist – examples are the Harvard Business School in the United States, the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario in Canada, and INSEAD in France. Information Systems could adopt these approaches as well. It is not difficult to conceive of an IS journal for executives or an IS/IT school with practice at the heart of its mission. One example is the Claremont IS School, which views its mission to include “Research for Practice”, a term first used by Lynne Markus.

### **WHAT DO ACADEMICS NEED?**

On her travel along the yellow brick road Dorothy met the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion. Each wanted to go to the Emerald City to get something from the wizard. The Tin Man wanted a heart, the Scarecrow brains, and the Cowardly Lion, courage. So what do IS academics need? James Cortada (1998), writing on best practices in IT, argues that IT executives need to be on senior management committees, IT needs to be equal in status with other functional areas, and IT and the business units have to integrate their operations. Borrowing these ideas for IS in academia, we may rewrite these statements: IS academics need to be on the senior managements of their Business School faculties; IS needs to be equal in status to Accounting, Finance, Marketing, Quantitative Methods, and Organizational Analysis; and IS needs to be integrated into the business school curriculum. Does this sound possible? I didn't think so. Just as business schools had to be formed as separate from their founding disciplines of psychology, sociology, and economics, so too must IS be separate from its founding areas. When IS lives in a department of Accounting it is too concerned with the production of information. When it is in with Management it is too behavioral. When it is found with Computer Science it is too concerned with programming and applications. When it is in with Engineering it is too technical. The Information Systems discipline is being swamped by the

competing paradigms and disciplines in the Business Schools. It can only prosper when IS academics find the heart to consider creating their own schools, the brains to make the decision, and the courage to strike out on their own. There are now a number of major institutions where IS is a school of its own. Examples are the University of California Berkeley's School of Information Management and Systems, Syracuse University's School of Information Studies, and Claremont Graduate University's School of Information Science. This vanguard of separate IS schools needs to be joined by a movement of IS out of business schools and into their own separate school status.

## CONCLUSION

Americans often visit Canada and say that Canadians need to be more confident. As a Canadian visiting the United States it is ironic that I would say the same about IS academics. It is time to stop asking questions about being practical, being a science, and having a paradigm, and just get on with the work of studying and writing about the organizational use of information systems and information technology.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Richard Field's** interests are in the intersection of organizational behavior and information systems. He is currently working on the question of how and why organizational web site designs change over time. Having a first degree in Mathematics and Computing Science from the University of Waterloo, then an MBA in Quantitative Methods from McMaster University, and finally a PhD in Organizational Behavior from the University of Toronto, he has drifted ever farther from his roots. Now, after twenty years, he has decided that Dorothy was right and that there is "no place like home."

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