View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Volume 6 Article 17

March 2001

A Broader View of Relevance

Kieran Mathieson
Oakland University, K.Mathieso@oakland.edu

Terry Ryan
Indiana University-South Bend, tryan@iusb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais

Recommended Citation
Mathieson, Kieran and Ryan, Terry (2001) "A Broader View of Relevance," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 6 , Article 17.
DOI: 10.17705/1CAIS.00617
Available at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol6/iss1/17

This material is brought to you by the AIS Journals at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in Communications of the Association for Information Systems by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.

Communications of the Association for Information Systems

A BROADER VIEW OF RELEVANCE

Kieran Mathieson
Oakland University

Terry Ryan,
Indiana University, South Bend

mathieso@oakland.edu

ABSTRACT

The question of the relevance of MIS research to practitioners is part of the broader question of the match between academic research goals and the goals of constituents. We call for a broader conception of who those constituents might be, and the implications that has for the activities of MIS academics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of MIS research to practitioners is part of a larger issue: the match between an MIS faculty member's goals and those of his or her constituents. Constituents' goals vary, of course. Most undergraduate MIS students want to learn skills for the job marketplace. Business executives are interested in the strategic potential of IT. Universities want funding and prestige.

For most of us, research goals coexist with teaching goals, institutional service goals, professional service goals, and more. Consider the set of goals we pursue our goal profile. Our goal profiles include (and are partially derived from) our personal goals.

In our view, "relevance" is the extent to which an MIS faculty member's activities serve his or her constituents' goals. Practitioner relevance is only an issue if the faculty member's constituents include practitioners. Practitioners are not all the same, of course. Activities that might interest a database administrator might not interest a trainer.

Academicians face several problems in doing relevant research. First, constituents' goals often are not articulated, or not articulated very well. Goals change as business, academic, and technical environments change. Further, the goals of a particular individual change over time.

Second, MIS academics have limited resources. They are dwarfed by those available to many practitioners, and are puny compared to those of the largest MIS corporations. It seems unreasonable to expect MIS academics to publish solutions to important problems before the industry moves on.

Third, the academic reward system values some work more than others. For example, research on MIS teaching attracts relatively few accolades. It isn't clear that work practitioners judge as relevant is rewarded very highly either.

Fourth, there is the relative worthiness of constituents' goals. Suppose a faculty member is employed at a public university. What research justifies the taxpayers' investment in her salary? Is justification even an issue? Should she just pursue her own intellectual interests, regardless of their benefit to those supporting her?

We can't answer all of these questions. But we can make some suggestions to MIS faculty, the institutions that employ them, and the academic community to which they belong.

II. GOAL PROFILES FOR MIS FACULTY MEMBERS

If you want to do relevant research, seek a match between a constituent's interests and your own. You can identify the goals of your current constituents and assume those. You can choose your own goals and look for constituents with similar interests. Perhaps some combination of the two will be the most effective.

Whatever you do, you should try to be honest with yourself and others. For example, if you want to help practitioners with requirements analysis for enterprise systems, it is unlikely that a lab study with college freshmen will be of much use. Case studies and action research are more likely to generate relevant results; that is, results that actually help people doing requirements analysis for enterprise systems. Be realistic about what you can achieve. If you teach four classes per semester, it is unlikely you can solve the latest problem in B2B e-commerce before it becomes history.

Of course, "be honest" is a value statement. You can choose to deceive others, and even yourself. You can adopt the appearance of relevance, jumping from topic to topic without any intention of helping the constituents you claim to serve. If you choose this strategy, at least acknowledge to yourself that you are not serving anyone's interests but your own.

This isn't to say that your own interests are unimportant. Quite the contrary. For most people, rewarding work is important to personal happiness. The key is working out what "rewarding" means to you. In the best of worlds, what you find rewarding will also serve your chosen constituents.

Sometimes you need to be creative in the search for relevance. For example, the first author studies the use of IT in moral growth, that is, how IT can help people develop an ethical perspective, and use it in making difficult choices. Morality is an issue close to his heart, as it is for many of the citizens who pay his salary. Further, despite the limited resources at hand, the research might have an impact on constituents' lives. True, it isn't a traditional MIS topic, and has nothing to do with "business" or "IS practice," at least not directly. But it does have the hallmarks of relevance.

III. GOAL PROFILES FOR INSTITUTIONS

Most institutions favor some constituents over others, even if only implicitly. Ideally, those institutions would recruit for, reward, and support activities serving their chosen constituents. They would recognize that individual faculty members can't be everything to everyone. They might hire different people for different parts of their goal profile, and measure their performance differently.

This situation often doesn't occur, of course. Many schools have a variety of goals, but a single reward system that cannot recognize different goal profiles. At the least, however, each school should decide which goal profiles it considers reasonable.

IV. GOAL PROFILES FOR THE MIS DISCIPLINE

The discipline should support academic communities with different goal profiles. The communities might only be loosely associated with one another, since they are likely to favor different research

questions and methods. For example, business strategy researchers might use case studies, teaching researchers might use experiments, and technology management researchers might use action research. The standards of one group should not be used to judge another, without due reflection on differences in goals and constraints.

Most important of all, the academy should not arrogantly deny the legitimacy of different goal sets. The greatest danger is that the discipline will choose a goal set that is not tenable for many faculty members, and then demand that everyone subscribe to it. The result? Lip service to the goals, publications that seem to serve them but actually do not, and growing cynicism about the MIS field.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

For each of us: Know yourself. Know your constituents. Seek a match.

For institutions: Choose goal profiles. Match recruiting, reward, retention, and market positioning to those profiles.

For the MIS discipline: Recognize goal diversity. Value different goals. Support communities with different goal profiles.

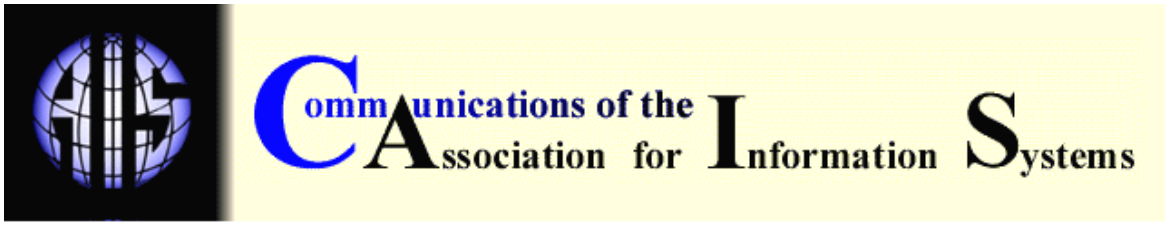
We'd like to end on an introspective note. Everyone reading this is an individual, with his or her own fears and aspirations. Every hour you devote to research is gone forever. What do *you* want from those hours?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kieran Mathieson is associate professor at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. His research focuses on the role of IT in personal moral development.

Terence Ryan is associate professor at Indiana University South Bend. He received his Ph.D.from Indiana University Bloomington, with a major in MIS. His research interests include the analysis of work systems having information technology elements.

Copyright © 2001 by the Association for Information Systems. Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and full citation on the first page. Copyright for components of this work owned by others than the Association for Information Systems must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers, or to redistribute to lists requires prior specific permission and/or fee. Request permission to publish from: AIS Administrative Office, P.O. Box 2712 Atlanta, GA, 30301-2712 Attn: Reprints or via e-mail from ais@gsu.edu .



ISSN: 1529-3181

EDITOR
Paul Gray
Claremont Graduate University

AIS SENIOR EDITORIAL BOARD

Henry C. Lucas, Jr. Editor-in-Chief New York University	Paul Gray Editor, CAIS Claremont Graduate University	Phillip Ein-Dor Editor, JAIS Tel-Aviv University
Edward A. Stohr Editor-at-Large New York University	Blake Ives Editor, Electronic Publications Louisiana State University	Reagan Ramsower Editor, ISWorld Net Baylor University

CAIS ADVISORY BOARD

Gordon Davis University of Minnesota	Ken Kraemer University of California at Irvine	Richard Mason Southern Methodist University
Jay Nunamaker University of Arizona	Henk Sol Delft University	Ralph Sprague Universityof Hawaii

CAIS EDITORIAL BOARD

Steve Alter University of San Francisco	Tung Bui University of Hawaii	Christer Carlsson Abo Academy, Finland	H. Michael Chung California State University
Omar El Sawy University of Southern California	Jane Fedorowicz Bentley College	Brent Gallupe Queens University, Canada	Sy Goodman University of Arizona
Ruth Guthrie California State University	Chris Holland Manchester Business School, UK	Jaak Jurison Fordham University	George Kasper Virginia Commonwealth University
Jerry Luftman Stevens Institute of Technology	Munir Mandviwalla Temple University	M.Lynne Markus Claremont Graduate University	Don McCubbrey University of Denver
Michael Myers University of Auckland, New Zealand	Seev Neumann Tel Aviv University, Israel	Hung Kook Park Sangmyung University, Korea	Dan Power University of Northern Iowa
Maung Sein Agder College, Norway	Margaret Tan National University of Singapore, Singapore	Robert E. Umbaugh Carlisle Consulting Group	Doug Vogel City University of Hong Kong, China
Hugh Watson University of Georgia	Dick Welke Georgia State University	Rolf Wigand Syracuse University	Phil Yetton University of New South Wales, Australia

ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL

Eph McLean AIS, Executive Director Georgia State University	Jennifer Davis Subscriptions Manager Georgia State University	Reagan Ramsower Publisher, CAIS Baylor University