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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

THE IS CORE – IV: IS RESEARCH: A THIRD WAY

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the IS community found little difficulty in producing rigorous research, but its relevance for the practitioner community is frequently questioned. While agreeing with the need for a sharper focus for IS research, this paper suggests that past problems with relevance can be avoided by engaging the academic and practitioner communities in setting a research agenda using an "open source" approach. Such an approach would assure that academic researchers remain focused on relevant issues in a fast-moving field, and offers an opportunity to draw the academic and practitioner communities closer together for their mutual benefit.

Keywords: IS core, communities of interest, IS research, open source

I. INTRODUCTION

The two papers on IS research perspectives by Benbasat and Zmud [2003] and Alter [2003] are thoughtful, well reasoned contributions to the issue of a focus for IS research. There is however, a third perspective on the issue (and, no doubt, a fourth and fifth as well).

Their discussion gave us a new opportunity to act on the oft-repeated dictum that our research be both "rigorous and relevant". Over the years, we found little difficulty to demonstrate rigor. Where we often fell short, however, was in being relevant. This paper will be short, and will not attempt to support the "lack of relevance" statement. Further, it does not mean to infer that all IS research lacks relevance, just that too much of it does not pass the "so what" test.

II. RELEVANCE TO WHOM?

As academicians, we are teachers and scholars. Our scholarly efforts are directed towards the needs of both the academic and practitioner communities. We are easily able to identify research topics of interest to the academic community. Our journals receive and publish much that is useful to us in the classroom: cases, advanced curricula, recommended curricula, new teaching approaches, and the like. Where we often fall short is that we publish papers in our journals that, while they are of interest to the academic community, are of little interest to IS practitioners. As a result, practitioners are not attracted to our journals. Our journals often contain little that is

relevant to practitioners' concerns, and they are busy people. Most of them are under daily pressures to perform and to demonstrate the value of IS to their organizations.

III. COMMENTS ON THE TWO PERSPECTIVES

Are IS practitioners interested in issues that fall outside of the boundaries described by Benbasat and Zmud (2003) and by Alter (2003)? The practitioner community is certainly concerned with issues related to IT artifacts and their "nomological nets" and "work systems". However, IS practitioners' interests go beyond these domains, and some issues encompassed by these domains are not likely to be of interest to practitioners.

Recent events raised values-based issues nearer to the top of many business managers' lists of concerns. For example, as professionals, we are concerned about the digital divide. It might be a bit of a stretch to include this issue in either of the proposed domains. As another example, some of the most impressive uses of IT artifacts employed on campuses today are found in Schools of Music. And while they are certainly interesting, they are not likely to be artifacts of interest to our community of practice, which is focused on the use of IS for business benefits in a highly competitive global business environment.

While there is certainly an argument, (well-made in both papers) for a sharper focus for IS research, a case can be made for a third perspective. The third perspective is to urge the IS research community to focus more on issues relevant to IS practitioners.

IV.INFORMATION SYSTEMS IS A FAST-MOVING FIELD

IS is a fast-moving field. Many academic journals are hard-pressed to keep up with the world of practice because of long review and publication cycles. (That is why the short cycle time of journals like CAIS is so appealing). Even practitioners whose business success depends on their keeping up, and anticipating, where technology will take them encounter trouble adapting. Remember how many practitioners, from Bill Gates on down, failed to see the impact the Internet would have on business? Trying to adopt a narrow focus for IS research makes it difficult, and perhaps even counter-productive to attain our goal of relevancy. Better to focus our efforts on dealing with issues the practitioner community is struggling with today, and do so in a timely manner. Let's also focus on calling their attention to issues that will confront them tomorrow, issues which they have not yet fully anticipated or digested.

V. HOW DO WE DISCOVER THE RELEVANT ISSUES?

Our marketing colleagues would probably tell us that we should find out what our customers want from us in the way of research, rather than us telling them what they need. One of the most powerful lessons of the Internet is the power shifts it created. Smart corporations realize that that they no longer own a monopoly on information. Customers can access information they never could before and they share it among themselves (Locke, 1999). The way consumers buy automobiles is one of the best examples. It used to be that the salesmen had all the information. Now buyers do their homework on the Internet in advance and visit the showroom armed with all the information they need to obtain the best price on their new car and their trade-in. The Internet facilitates knowledge-sharing among communities of interest using techniques ranging from informal social aggregation of useful knowledge to automated collaborative filtering [Rheingold, 2002].

The best example of this phenomenon, of course, is the open source approach to developing software. The same basic approach can, and is, being used in many other cooperative endeavors. A recent article put it this way:

> *"Open source is powerful because it's an alternative to the status quo, another way to produce things or solve problems. And in many cases, it's a better way. Better because current methods are not fast enough, not ambitious enough, or don't take advantage of our collective creative potential."* [Goetz 2003].

We are in the midst of a massive shift from the cathedral to the bazaar in many markets. Let's recognize this shift in the way we relate to the "customers" for our research. We may be a bit late in making the shift, just as others were, but that does not mean we are too late to act.

VI. DRAWING THE IS COMMUNITY INTO THE FORMULATION OF A RESEARCH AGENDA

Research Institutes with corporate sponsors usually engage the sponsors in the development of their research agendas. They do so for a good reason. If the corporate sponsors do not perceive the research agenda as relevant they will not contribute funds. IS journals used to publish papers on the "Ten Top IS Issues of CIOs" in various countries compared to the US until editors realized there are over 200 countries in the world. Editors began to wonder who cared what the top ten issues in Country X were, and stopped this particular "cottage industry". Still, the top concerns of practitioners are a good benchmark for relevancy.

The Internet gives us the power to create a consensus for a relevant research agenda. For example, a community of practitioners and researchers could be established, sponsored by SIM, AIS, CIO Magazine, or any one of many entities that reach both academics and practitioners. We would need a Web site to solicit research topics from both sectors and create an open source process to fine tune and rank the topics. The software engineering community engaged their constituents in a similar process to develop a software engineering body of knowledge [Bourque and Dupuis 2003]. The EC Institute is currently developing a straw man body of knowledge to offer to the EC community for comment by the end of 2003, using a process similar to the one used by the software engineering community. [EC Institute 2003]. An open source approach to developing a community-based research agenda would, of course, take some time and effort, but it could be one way of obtaining a broad consensus on research topics of interest to the IS practitioner community for consideration by IS academics.

Naturally, a consensus research agenda would not be needed or wanted by some academics. Many good researchers pursue problems of interest to themselves whether or not anyone else thinks their problem is important today. However, for those researchers who are looking for relevant paths to pursue, a consensus research agenda could prove to be useful, even if only to compare a research idea to the consensus agenda as one test of relevancy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Benbasat and Zmud [2003] and Alter [2003], who spurred these comments deserve a vote of thanks for raising the issue of a focus for IS research. We have an opportunity to address the issue in a way that draws the wider community into the process. By doing so, we can develop and continually modify a research agenda that reflects a broad community consensus. We can also demonstrate an understanding of the way the Internet can be used to engage the IS community (both academics and practitioners) in the effort. The concept suggested in this paper could also be implemented in a way that would match researchers with companies that have similar research interests and, in so doing, create additional benefits for both academics and practitioners.

Editor's Note: This article is the fourth in the series titled *The IS Core***.** At the time of publication, the papers in this CAIS series included Articles 31 through 42 and the editorial in Article 43. These articles were motivated by Benbasat and Zmud [2003] in the MIS Quarterly and by Article 30 [Alter 2003] in this journal. The article was received on October 7, 2003and was published on November 24, 2003.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following reference list contains the address of World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their computer or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.

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Don McCubbrey is Clinical Professor in the Department of Information Technology and Electronic Commerce (ITEC) and Director of the Center for the Study of Electronic Commerce in the Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver. From 1957 to 1983 he worked in the Management Information Consulting Division of Andersen Consulting, Arthur Andersen & Co, where he was responsible for the conduct of a large number of information systems planning, design, and installation engagements throughout the U.S. as well as in Europe and the Americas. He became a partner in the Firm in 1969.

Since joining the University of Denver faculty in 1984, he concentrates his teaching and research in the areas of Strategic Information Systems, Electronic Commerce, and Information Systems Management. He is a co-founder of the Colorado Software and Internet Association, the Colorado Electronic Commerce Roundtable, and the EC Institute.

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