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Reminiscences and Reflections on my Retirement: Ten Takeaways that Worked for Me
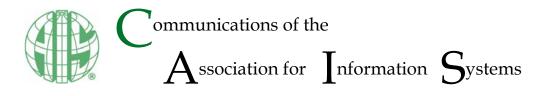
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Reminiscences and Reflections on my Retirement: Ten Takeaways that Worked for Me[1]

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Abstract:

In this paper, I reflect on a 45-year career in higher education. I hope that PhD students and assistant professors looking ahead to such a career along with some mid-career academics will find my experiences and the lessons I discuss useful and relevant.

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[1] Readers can find an earlier version of this paper in Fitzgerald and Malaurent (2018), which formed part of a presentation to me at the European Conference in Information Systems on June, 2018 at Portsmouth, UK, on the occasion of my retirement.

1   Unsuccessful Beginnings

In this paper, I reflect on a 45-year career in higher education. I hope that PhD students and assistant professors looking ahead to such a career along with some mid-career academics will find my experiences and the lessons I discuss useful and relevant. I also hope that it may spur on those from the same generation as me to offer different stories and conflicting viewpoints as others may have had different experiences (see, e.g., Bjørn-Andersen & Clemmensen, 2017). Times change, policies vary between countries, universities change, research leaders and teaching philosophies change, and so on. For these reasons, what worked for me may not apply to you.

It may surprise readers (on the other hand it may not) that, in many respects, I am an academic failure. Following some years at an appalling junior school, in 1956, at the age of ten, I sat the school entrance exam, normal in the UK at that time. I entered, and failed, all three exams that I took. Therefore, I entered a run-down senior school that expected students (if fortunate) to become metal workers in a factory. However, I was an early failure even at that. The head of metalwork was so disenchanted with my scone cutter on which I had worked so hard that he stamped his foot on it and squashed it. I learnt that a couple of years later he was admitted to a mental hospital. Science was also a no-no since the teacher brilliantly demonstrated the effect of exposing a large piece of phosphorous in air, burnt himself, and threw the burning phosphorous in a waste paper basket that led to a serious fire in a wing of the building.

However, when I was 14, the school closed and a new one opened with the hope that some students may even take exams. At the age of 16, I took my first set of exams and managed to fail most of them. I repeated the year, passed a few more, and entered the two-year program to sit the university entrance exams. I did not perform well but well enough to enter a low-esteemed college, and, a year later, the more prestigious University of Leicester admitted me to study social sciences. I spent a wonderful three years there.

I passed my university degree but not well (a lower II to those in the know), and the grade did not enable me to do a master's degree at that time. Among many interviews at companies, I was offered two attractive posts as a trainee accountant at a car manufacturer and a trainee computer programmer at a food processing company. Following a comment from my uncle Norman that "computers was the thing to get into", the choice was made and I became a trainee computer programmer. I trust graduates today choose their future project with more care than I did. Contrary to what you might expect for an information systems (IS) academic, I found computer programming very difficult and alien to my way of thinking. After 18 months or so at the company I was told by my manager that "we will not fight to keep you if you decide to look elsewhere". I did look elsewhere and got a job at an oil company and found my later role of systems analyst and project leader (and responsibility for a group of programmers) much more akin to my strengths and liking. Nevertheless, after four years in the corporate world, I decided to apply for a master's course at North London Polytechnic. Although people saw polytechnics in the UK as training institutions at the time, I hoped the qualification would help me to teach in higher education. Guy Fitzgerald was a fellow student on the MSc course, and he has been a friend, colleague, and co-author ever since.

I outline my "history" above to encourage others that not all is lost if you (or your children and their friends) do not have a history of early academic success. In a changed world where many people see early exam success as paramount, I hope opportunities to recover from a poor start still exist. Happily, my periods of study coincided with the time in the UK when the government supported students to study. This support included living expenses. Unfortunately today's high university fees and a general lack of state support for study in the UK and elsewhere have reduced such opportunities greatly.

2   Meeting My Peers and More Experienced Colleagues

Following my MSc qualification at the Polytechnic of North London, I joined Thames Polytechnic as a lecturer in 1974. Trevor Wood-Harper started at Thames on the same day. As with Guy, Trevor has been a major positive influence on me. Despite the training bias, I found the three years spent there invaluable. Trevor told me about action research and systems thinking (his masters took place at Lancaster University under Peter Checkland (1981 and 1999)). While at Thames, I published my first paper in 1975 in the *Computer Bulletin*, a British Computer Society magazine, on computers and privacy. It was co-authored by Tom Crowe, my head of department (Avison & Crowe, 1976). While reminiscing about such events, I re-read this paper and, in it, I discuss the dangers that databases might bring to our personal right of privacy. Although privacy is still an active research topic, I think that we lost that battle many years ago! This early publishing success gave me a taste for research and publishing. Tom and I published a book together on databases for management information (Crowe & Avison, 1980), and he also introduced me to the ARPA network in 1975 so that I might use Datacomputer America (a very large database system of its time). I found the ARPA network very slow, difficult to use, and frustrating due to frequent failures and downtime—in short, impossible. Clearly, it had no future[2]! Much more successful was my work with Trevor developing Multiview (Wood-Harper, 1989; Avison & Wood-Harper, 1990) for which he was the inspiration and "brains". We were greatly influenced by Checkland (1981), Land (1982), and Mumford's (1995) ETHICS method.

I joined Aston University in 1977 in the hope that I could develop my research interests, supervise PhD students, and teach at a higher level. The fourteen years at Aston proved to be fruitful. One of the life-changing experiences was my attending the 1984 Manchester conference of IFIP's Working Group 8.2 (Mumford, Hirschheim, Fitzgerald, & Wood-Harper, 1985). This event, which Enid Mumford organized, looked at research methods and approaches appropriate to studying the organizational and social impacts of IT. At the event, I met Richard Baskerville, Niels Bjørn-Andersen, Dick Boland, Sue Conger, Gordon Davis, Bob Galliers, Rudy Hirschheim, Julie Kendall, Kenneth Kendall, Heinz Klein, Frank Land, Ron Weber, and many others, and I still have the utmost respect for these excellent colleagues. Having previously researched databases, albeit the organizational aspects more than the technical ones, I could not believe that research into computing could be so interesting and challenging. It also confirmed my interest in qualitative research.

Later, I was fortunate to meet Peter Checkland, Robert Davison, Juhani Iivari, Rob Kling, Kalle Lyytinen, Lynne Markus, Lars Mathiassen, Michael Myers, Mike Newman, Wanda Orlikowski, Jan Pries-Heje, Nancy Russo, Duane Truex, Richard Vidgen, Geoff Walsham, and many other leading lights through this group. Workshops and conferences (often the smaller, specialized ones) can be a great place to converse with potential colleagues. The larger conferences can be somewhat disarming, particularly early in one's career. It should be evident that IFIP WG 8.2 has true international representation that enables researchers to air many different perspectives but remain small enough to enable deep conversations and relationships. I note the kindness that Julie Kendall and I received from Gordon Davis when we were joint program chairs of an IFIP conference in 1993 at a time when we needed help and support. Like Frank Land and Enid Mumford (and many others), Gordon proved to be a wonderful colleague when the chips were down. I was honored later to serve as secretary, vice chair, and chair of the group over a nine-year period. I loved every minute sharing a passionate interest in qualitative research with other members. Incidentally, it was also great fun.

I was very fortunate while at Aston to have excellent PhD students. Many shared action research projects with me that helped to further refine Multiview (along with Trevor, Richard Vidgen and Bob Wood) and my knowledge of the social process of IS development more generally (Vidgen, Avison, Wood, & Wood-Harper, 2002). Multiview, defined originally in the early 1980s and refined in the following years, emphasized the social and organizational aspects of IS development rather than the technical. While researchers may commonly focus on such aspects now, they did not do so in the 1980s. We also emphasized the flexibility

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[2] The ARPA Network was the precursor to the Internet.

necessary for IS development, which people that advocated agile methods later took up (Beck et al., 2001) in contrast to the prescribed formal, rigid approaches that many practitioner methodologies (such as SSADM in the UK) expected people to follow (Fitzgerald, 1998). I recognized these requirements for a flexible, contingent approach that emphasized cultural, social, and organizational aspects in my previous practice of IS development and through experiences gained in many action research projects. However, it was not until 1990 that I wrote up my thoughts and research-in-practice as a PhD dissertation. I was very grateful to examiners Bob Galliers and Ian Angell for their thumbs up and bottle of champagne.

Guy and I wrote a text on IS development, published first in 1988 (Avison & Fitzgerald, 2003). We set out to discuss IS development's wide-ranging techniques and tools but emphasized the various approaches to it while again paying attention to both the social and organizational aspects and to the technical ones. The text has sold well over 100,000 copies in four editions. However, if one adds borrowed library copies, bought and sold second-hand copies, legal and illegal translations, legal and illegal photocopying, and so on—none of which I object to—it has impacted a lot of people. Many conference delegates over the years have come up to me and said they "grew up" with this book, which I mention here to stress the importance and impact of scholarly books. How many research papers in IS have had a similar reach and impact? I suggest very few! Yet, deans continue to discourage IS researchers from writing books while suggesting they have no importance for the contemporary academic. I beg to differ.

Guy and I also founded and edited the *Information Systems Journal* (ISJ), the first issue of which we published at the International Conference of Information Systems (ICIS) in 1990. We came up with this idea to help people who did excellent research and, in particular (but not necessarily), qualitative research and yet who could not publish their work in the journals of the time. We also wanted to publish papers that challenged conventional wisdom. Both Guy and I acknowledge the huge contributions of our original associate editors, Richard Baskerville and Michael Myers, and those that followed. Without their energy and wisdom, we would not have been successful. I take this opportunity to thank them most enthusiastically. We were also fortunate to put together an outstanding board of editors. Every year or two we met at ICIS, and we were always amazed by the commitment and help that the board gave to us editors. They were leading lights in the discipline and very busy people, yet they were so helpful and willing to give up considerable time. I thank them most enthusiastically as well. Readers can find our reflections on the experience in Avison and Fitzgerald (2012). We are delighted that Robert Davison is doing such an excellent job now that Guy and I decided to give up our role as co-editors (reluctantly, but many might say not before time).

3   Further Challenges

I now return to my theme of failure. I realized I would not be promoted at Aston and I applied for a full professorship elsewhere. I applied to many universities that rejected my application, such as Brunel, Curtin, Imperial College, Keele, London School of Economics, Portsmouth, Queen Mary College, New South Wales, University Technology Sydney, Queensland, and Warwick. I did not have an interview with most, and, in others, I was told that action research was not a bona fide research approach. To be fair, however, not completing a PhD until 1990 was a serious mistake on my part. Finally, in 1991, the University of Southampton accepted me as a professor after the first-choice candidate refused the university's offer.

I was head of department at Southampton for three years as I was later at ESSEC. I found both periods difficult. Obviously, I tried to do the best for my colleagues on both occasions to improve the working environment and enable people to get on with their teaching and research, but, in making each change, even though most people tended to be positive about that change, a few thought that they had lost out. As such, I alienated different colleagues with each change and colleagues remembered (and did not forgive) the instances when it affected them negatively yet forgot or took the changes that they positively received for granted. After three years, I had probably alienated everybody at one time or another. I have also suffered under many poor heads of department. Therefore, it is with great admiration that I mention Ray Paul who made great positive changes at Brunel University (where I was visiting professor for many years) and did so without alienating most colleagues. Ray's example proved to me that one could indeed make great

changes in a human way and get colleagues to commit to them. For similar reasons, I also admire Vincenzo Esposito Vinzi at ESSEC. He has been an exceptional dean of faculty (being re-elected with 93 percent of the faculty vote). It bodes well for ESSEC that he was made dean and president in 2017 following Jean-Michel Blanquer's appointment as France's minister of education.

I have not discussed teaching up to this point. It occurs to me that, though we are expected to teach and research well, they require very different skills and personalities that individual people seldom possess. I have had both good and bad experiences. Even though I am not a "charismatic" teacher, when it goes well (i.e., the students are interested and motivated, they see the future value of the subject, they are challenged and react positively to challenges, they think and contribute to discussions rather than merely learn by rote, and so on), both I and the students find the experience exciting. At other times, it can be much more difficult with students that do not see the value of IS, study it under sufferance, and make their negative views about studying it clear to me. Sadly, at times, I have resorted to the superficial tactic of using short YouTube items to stimulate their interest and to trying (but often failing) to lead them on to discussions that provide a deeper understanding. I have had better experience using Austin, Nolan, and O'Donnell (2009) because business students appreciate the realistic story presented, and I would like to see more texts of that type. Although IS, like other subjects, is subject to fashion (Baskerville & Myers, 2009), I am mystified as to why IS does not remain permanently fashionable since it affects us in so many ways and will continue to impact on all our personal lives and organizational activities. I fear some business school students, but by no means all, focus too much on those topics that they see as the most likely to provide the largest pay packet after graduating. In an environment where they are likely to change roles frequently, such a focus is short-sighted to say the least. I see IS as particularly valuable in the curriculum because it can provide a way of thinking that will help people to adapt to change in their future careers (and not only to the inevitable developments in the information and communication technologies).

4   Moving On

My experience suggests that one needs to move sometimes to advance one's career. After Dominique Briolat kindly invited me, I took up a visiting professorship at ESSEC Business School near Paris during a sabbatical from Southampton. Two years later, in 2000, I joined ESSEC permanently and was honored to be the first professor at ESSEC given the title Distinguished Professor in 2004. ESSEC have also been incredibly generous in supporting my research. As well as enabling me to do research with colleagues at ESSEC and outside, they encouraged me to accept offers to be program chair of several international conferences, including ICIS at Las Vegas in 2005. To prepare for this conference, I worked with two excellent colleagues, co-program chair Dennis Galletta and conference chair Reza Torkzedah. Reza and I later published a book on project management, which again stressed the people side of the IS development process (Avison & Torkzadeh, 2008), with the help of various sabbatical opportunities. Sabbaticals and visiting positions provide a great opportunity for joint research, which my joint publications with Philip Ein-Dor, Shirley Gregor, Michael Myers, and David Wilson, and Reza (all of whom I have visited and/or have visited me) exemplify. To give just one further example, inspired by Michael's deep understanding of qualitative research, following his visit, we edited a book of readings (Myers & Avison, 2002) that illustrated the potential of the different qualitative approaches to our knowledge building (see also Myers, 2013).

I also owe so much to my research students, some of whom have themselves gained full professorships such as Con Connell, Alan Eardley, Mansoor Hassan, Philip Powell, and Hanifa Shah. I have published publications at the time and afterwards with these and many other research students. Just to give one further example, as well as later becoming co-editor of the *ISJ*, Philip and I have co-written papers (frequently with others) on alignment, change management, creativity, flexibility, status, uncertainty, and vision—all under the overall banner of business and IS strategy. Teaching and supervising PhD students has almost always been a joy in my experience and has frequently led to very positive longer-term research relationships. I have learnt more from them than they have from me! I have also gained knowledge and new friends from being an external examiner for PhDs elsewhere. IS research is an exciting world!

In my more recent work, mainly with Julien Malaurent at ESSEC, I have taken advantage of my age to take risks and have attempted to publish "something different". Amongst other projects, we have challenged the view that all good published research papers should be theory heavy (Avison & Malaurent, 2014), suggested that interpretive research need to include a third "R" (i.e., reflexivity) to add to rigor and relevance (Malaurent & Avison, 2017), used the principles of the French "new novelists" to inspire a different form of writing up and studying research case studies (Avison, Malaurent, & Eynaud, 2017), and researched social media and street art inspired by Julien's interest in the latter. Why do we research in the same old domains and why do we not challenge current thinking more? Papers by Markus (1983) and Schultze (2000) highlight the potential value of challenging the status quo.

But I have always tried to do something different, which, for example, my interest in action research exemplifies (Avison, Lau, Myers, & Nielson, 1999). Along with disadvantaging me in job applications, I remember being laughed at by an ICIS audience to a panel on European research in the early 1990s when discussing action research as I obviously gave unsatisfactory responses to questions such as "where is the proof of your conclusions?", "how can you generalize for organizations with confidence as you can with the sampling/statistical analysis approach?", and "how does this relate to formal methods?". I found this experience very uncomfortable. But, although it proved to be costly in the short term, my experience of action research proved more beneficial in the longer term and even most recently when, along with Ned Kock and Julien, I edited a late 2017 special issue of the *Journal of Management Information System* (*JMIS*) on action research (Avison, Kock, & Malaurent, 2017). I am neither the deepest thinker nor the greatest researcher, but I have tried to do something different and hopefully have not bored readers and conference participants to death in the process. Nevertheless, although I have published successfully, this record hides many, many rejections. We all must face rejection and should not see it as an excuse to give up but rather an exciting challenge.

I wish to mention with gratitude Frantz Rowe's great help as supervisor of my *habilitation à diriger des recherche* (HDR) for which Jacky Akoka, Richard Baskerville, Rolande Marciniak, and Robert Reix served as the examiners. Formally, this post-doctoral qualification gives one the right to direct research and to receive state funding for research in the French system. Less formally, even though it concerned my research and research supervision, it gave me an insight into IS research in France along with an introduction to some excellent French research colleagues. Frantz was very generous with his time and I am grateful for his wise input. I commend this aspect of the French system. A PhD trains one to do research; an HDR trains one to manage research projects and supervise research students. I see both trainings as essential qualifications for the good academic. Thanks to support from members of the IFIP working group 8.2, Jan Pries-Heje and I edited a book of readings on supervising and taking a doctorate in IS that we hope colleagues will find useful (Avison & Pries-Heje, 2005).

I was also elected president of the Association of Information Systems (AIS) from 2008 to 2009. I had wondered whether such an organization might be very "political". Far from it! The AIS council that I chaired was united in our aim to improve the IS discipline and, during my period, we set up AIS student chapters, enhanced the AIS library for members, and put the AIS on a more sustainable financial footing. Thanks also due to the efforts of Frantz Rowe, we also made the AIS more international by cycling ICIS alternatively in each of the three regions. Again, I can only thank the excellent colleagues in the AIS council at the time who worked tirelessly to improve the status of IS and the benefits to members. I am surprised (perhaps I should not be) to have enjoyed this period so much and I am enthusiastic about the actual and potential further contribution of the AIS to the IS world.

I mention above the importance of having some sort of project plan to your future, but one should not take such advice as sacrosanct. I have gained much of my experience through serendipity. For example, I have benefitted from discussions over a few beers while sailing with Les Weatheritt, a friend from schooldays who also survived that challenge; I met Marco DeMarco through a series of meetings discussing IS curricula financed by the European community; and my friendship with the sociologist David Silverman (2015)—I

would suggest *the* expert on qualitative research—came about from social events because our respective wives participated in a PhD program on French literature in London in the 1970s.

5   Lessons Learnt

I should conclude with some "takeaways" from my academic life. I emphasize again, however, that although the following lessons worked for me, times change, and what worked for me may not work for you in a different academic climate.

1) **Provide for late starters**: in my view, state education systems should provide support to late starters. Indeed, without it, I would not have succeeded in higher education. Similarly, such systems should provide for students from poorer families. Higher education institutions (and their deans) and governments might address this need.

2) **Acceptance for scholarly work**: research papers do not represent the only potential contribution from higher education. Textbooks make different contributions, but deans should, in my view, consider them to have, potentially at least, equal value to research papers.

3) **Researching with others**: you will note from my CV that I have rarely published on my own. Researching with others makes research more fun and, at least from my experience, improves the work greatly. I cannot sympathize with those colleagues and research students who are possessive about their research and refuse to research and publish with others. I am convinced that they make much less of an impact.

4) **Plan but do not stick to a plan rigidly**: do draft a plan for your long-term life project but be prepared to adapt the plan or even make more substantial changes as you progress. My research students' and colleagues' interests have driven much of my research. Take advantage of serendipity (some might say "be opportunistic"!).

5) **Attempt something different**: I do think it is a good strategy to attempt to do something different rather than following the mainstream and/or taking up the latest fashion. Unless you are a truly outstanding researcher, it is difficult to make an impact in an area that many others cover. Even if your time is not now, it may well come in the longer term when other researchers see you as an expert in your domain of interest (like me with action research). In choosing topics, I was much more influenced by my present (or what I saw as potential) interests and passions than what the mainstream did.

6) **Choose a longstanding overall theme**: my choice of IS development as a general overall theme following business experience developing systems proved to be longstanding; indeed, it remained in my sights throughout my career. Thus, choosing a general theme that you and IS colleagues will likely remain interested in after a long period from which you pick original themes that inspire you is also a good strategy.

7) **Contribute to conferences**: at conferences and workshops, particularly the smaller ones, you can meet up with others who do research in the same area and obtain good feedback for your research. Over time, your network builds up. It can be harder to achieve such a network at larger conferences, though many have streams, each of which specializes in a topic. Funding permitting, I aimed to go to at least one smaller conference or workshop and one larger one such as ICIS or ECIS every year. Again, some deans do not value conference proceedings, but your presence at conferences can be very beneficial.

8) **Do not give up**: all of us face rejections, but you should persist. By all means, resubmit a rejected paper elsewhere. But do take on board the suggestions that referees and editor make. Future referees' views likely mirror past referees' views; indeed, topic specialists are few, and your

paper might be sent to the same referees. "Not giving up" also applies to aiming for a promotion as when I searched for a full professorship.

9) **Think of the wider community***:* do try to contribute to the IS community at large. Supporting the work of conferences, journals, and learned societies does cost time and effort, but such contributions will be generously repaid in terms of friendship, experience, and support for research and teaching. In general, such links help you to build up your network of friends and research colleagues, which I think is essential for a good researcher.

10) **Be passionate in what you do:** I only took on a project if I felt strongly that its ultimate success was important: be it researching with a PhD student, developing a research paper, playing an editorial role for a journal or conference, going for a career move, or getting a proposal accepted at a committee meeting. Thus for those projects that I did take on, I devoted as much time as possible and worked very hard to ensure that they had a good chance of ultimate success.

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

David Avison is Distinguished Emeritus Professor of IS at ESSEC Business School, near Paris. He retired in September 2018. He was previously Professor of IS at Southampton University and visiting professor at Brunel University, London. He is Past-President of the AIS (2008-9), Past-President of the UKAIS, and was Co-Program Chair (with Dennis Galletta) of ICIS 2005, Las Vegas. With Guy Fitzgerald, he was founding editor of the *Information Systems Journal* (1990), and they remained Editors-in-Chief until 2012. They also authored the well-adopted text on IS development, now in its 4th edition. His text on IS project management (with Reza Torkzadeh) emphasizes the 'people side' of the process. He is noted for his use of qualitative research, in particular action research, and with Trevor Wood-Harper defined the Multiview framework for IS development (the subject of his PhD) using the knowledge gained from many action research projects from the early 1980s onwards. Multiview was a forerunner to agile systems development. More recently (Fall 2017), he edited a special issue of the *Journal of MIS* on action research (with Ned Kock, Julien Malaurent). For three years, he was Chair of IFIP Working Group 8.2 (focusing on the impact of IS on organizations and society). This group has made a great contribution to IS in legitimizing qualitative research. He has never been afraid of challenging conventional wisdom, evidenced most recently by the controversy regarding his papers with Julien Malaurent on the "fetish" of theory in IS and that advocating reflexivity as an essential third "R" (along with rigor and relevance) for interpretive research papers. He was previously awarded the IFIP Silver Core and is AIS Fellow and at ICIS 2018 in San Francisco he was presented with the LEO award for exceptional lifelong achievement in IS.