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Editors' Comments: Guidance for Research Articles Submitted to MIS Quarterly Executive – Where Research Shapes and is Shaped by Practice

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Guidance for Research Articles Submitted to MIS Quarterly Executive – Where Research Shapes and is Shaped by Practice

MIS Quarterly Executive plays a unique role in informing those responsible for information systems and digital technology within an organization. That uniqueness plays out in a variety of forms. Starting with the journal's history and its unique mission of publishing peer-reviewed, practice-based research, followed by its distinctive and author-centric review process, and concluded by the unique way we require papers to be written. The latter is vital. But before delving into the four cornerstones of how to write for *MIS Quarterly Executive*, permit me to share a bit of background about the journal's importance.

A Growing Recognition of Writing for Practice

Two decades ago, *MIS Quarterly Executive* emerged as a separate entity from its predecessor, *MIS Quarterly*. Initially, *MIS Quarterly* was a collaborative publication by the Society for Information Management (SIM), an association of Chief Information Officers, and the Management Information Systems Research Center at the University of Minnesota. It was intended to be a journal that bridged practice and scholarship. For reasons too complex to succinctly explain, that objective had—in a decade or so—begun to distinctly lean towards an academic audience and away from information systems practitioners.

Eventually SIM stopped distributing the journal to its members and relinquished its ownership stake to the University of Minnesota. Today, *MIS Quarterly* is widely regarded as one of the leading journals, if not the foremost journal, in the field of information systems research. While the business problem addressed by an *MIS Quarterly* article might have practical implications, the articles are written in the language of science, catering to a scholarly audience.

Allen Lee, as Editor in Chief of *MIS Quarterly* in 1999, recognized that the journal had, for justifiable reasons, drifted far from practice. At the same time, he also recognized that scholars needed to stay close to real-world problems and opportunities, and to offer support for information systems executives wrestling with the ever-accelerating drumbeat of technological innovation. Allen proposed a new journal that would package high-quality research for practitioners and encourage researchers to stay close to practice.[1] His vision of a journal was inspired more by problems and actions and less by literature and constructs.

In recent months, *MIS Quarterly* has started to require a "significance statement" to be appended to every manuscript submission. In this "concise articulation of why a paper is important for the world beyond academia," *MIS Quarterly's* current Editor-in-Chief Andrew Burton-Jones encourages future authors to undergo a relevancy check—not unlike the Addendum we require of our submissions[2]—to "conduct more significant research and to write it up more effectively."[3] Such a requirement from a prestigious research journal suggests something bigger is afoot and that we, as a discipline, have recognized that a renewed focus on practice is important.

That said, *MIS Quarterly* is not the only journal prioritizing impactful research. The *European Journal of Information Systems* has introduced a new category called "Clinical IS Research,"[4] Similarly, the *Information Systems Journal* has made a noteworthy commitment to "Practice IS Research," signaling their intention to foster research that addresses the needs and challenges of information systems practitioners.[5] These initiatives demonstrate a growing recognition, long championed at *MIS Quarterly Executive*, that

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1   See Junglas, I. "On the History of MIS Quarterly Executive," *MIS Quarterly Executive* (22:1), 2023, pp. iii-v.
2   See our instructions for authors at https://aisel.aisnet.org/misqe/policies.html
3   See Burton-Jones, A., Gray, P. and Majchrzak, A. "Producing Significant Research," Editorial, *MIS Quarterly* (47:1), 2023, pp. i-xv.
4   See Baskerville, R., vom Brocke, J., Mathiassen, L. and Scheepers, H. "Clinical Research from Information Systems Practice," Editorial, *European Journal of Information Systems* (32:1), 2023, pp. 1-9.
5   See ISJ Author Guidelines: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/13652575/homepage/forauthors.html

our work needs to be impactful if we are to be credible.

Other disciplines show a growing importance on practice as well. The Academy of Management, for example, created AOM Insights, an online journal that "brings the best academic research findings to managers and business leaders worldwide."[6] With their "get-right-to-the-point format" and "easy-to-read summaries of AOM journal articles," they intend to "transform peer-reviewed management research from the world's top scholars into actionable evidence for the workplace."[7] Their website showcases summaries of published AOM journal articles, as well as videos and infographics across all management domains.

As a growing movement, we welcome and encourage these initiatives. But we also know from over twenty years of experience at *MIS Quarterly Executive* that the road ahead will be a challenging one. It is difficult to ensure that research is informed by practice, and it is difficult to craft and present research that can and will inform practice. Both problems can be addressed by building better bridges between practice and academia. Rich examples include the Society for Information Management's Advanced Practice Council (APC), research centers like the Center for Information Systems Research at MIT, and the case collection at Harvard Business School. Both personal and institutional relationships need to be established, or re-established, and the language of scholarly reporting reconsidered.

Even then, impact on practice will be difficult, and perhaps impossible to assess. Citations, publication counts, journal rankings, and journal impact factors are, at best, imperfect, and manipulable measures of impact on research,[8] but say little to nothing about real impact— the impact on practice. The measurement light shines brightly on research impact, while the light of impact on practice is a dim one. Due to the pressures of promotion and tenure committees, this problem may very well be intractable, particularly for Carnegie R1 and R2 institutions. Still, that these two highly regarded journals are cracking open new genre doors focused on practice is a promising sign.

Writing for Inquisitive Practitioners and Reflective Academicians

It does not matter how useful our guidance is if the person who might have benefitted the most from our articles either never learns of it or quits reading after a sentence or two. Those are two problems we try hard to address. For the first, we are committed to leveraging resources, such as LinkedIn, and our connections with industry groups, such as the Society for Information Management, to market, not our journal, but our articles and their authors. In a manner of speaking, we are no longer selling albums (quarterly issues), but rather individual songs and artists (articles and authors).

Second, we will continue to require our authors to write for practitioners rather than fellow academicians. When looking at submissions, Jack Rockart, our founding Editor-in-Chief, sometimes exclaimed: "There is a pony in there somewhere." The "pony" Jack sought was something a practitioner would value. Revealing that value often requires help from our editorial team, particularly our Senior Editors. Informed by past editorial notes and conversations with that board, I have identified four cornerstones for screening submissions to ensure they will be of value to practice.

Cornerstone #1: The Anchor

The anchor is all about the problem set, or "the pony." What is the problem to begin with? How important is it? And why does it matter and to whom among our prospective audience? These are essential questions that anchor a paper. The anchor is also about novelty and timeliness.[9] The right anchor provides the motivation that hooks the reader and makes her read further. The anchor must be revealed in the abstract and at least hinted at in the title.

But finding the right anchor can be difficult. It is much easier for a researcher with an ear to the ground in industry. Problem sets often emerge naturally when writing case studies or participating in action research or consulting. Sometimes too, they emerge from involvement in

6   See: https://journals.aom.org/insights/aboutus
7   Ibid
8   See Burton-Jones A., and Wang, G. "What Makes a Journal Significant? From the Tyranny of Metrics to True Impact," Editorial, *MIS Quarterly* (47:2), 2023, pp. i-xiv.

9   See Piccoli, G. "Editor's Comments," *MIS Quarterly Executive* (18:2), 2019, pp. i-v.

executive education. As our motto "Research that helps shape and is shaped by practice" suggests, this is a two-way street. We want authors to be aware of the problems that our target readership faces. The more interaction authors have with the audience they are writing for, the richer their understanding of the problems being addressed and the opportunities that can be exploited by technological innovation. Unlike most university labs, organizations can spend tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars on information and digital technology. Those investments, or even far smaller ones, can evolve into great stories with rich lessons. Exploring what worked, and what did not, provides great guidance for our readers. At *MIS Quarterly Executive*, we are eager to share these stories.

Cornerstone #2: The Right-Sized Set of Recommendations

A detailed recommendation section is the second most important element of any *MIS Quarterly Executive* paper. Rich explanations of experiences, and an opportunity for the reader to evaluate whether success or failure was the outcome, and insights on actions to take going forward, are the blueprint for a great contribution.

Actionability is key.[10] Our goal is for every *MIS Quarterly Executive* paper to offer recommendations to executives who find themselves in a situation similar to the one experienced by the organization described in the research. Those recommendations must be both specific and generalizable to digital leaders in other organizations.

Finding the fine line between specificity and generalizability is not always easy. It might help to ponder: When read on Friday, what would a digital leader do differently on Monday morning? Also, it often helps to read aloud the set of recommendations and to verify with others that they are not too universal (e.g., "senior leadership is essential").

A typical *MIS Quarterly Executive* submission undergoes the most iterations in sharpening the recommendations to push beyond "lessons learned" and to arrive at key actions to take. IS researchers often summarize what we have learned and understood; in contrast, *MIS Quarterly Executive* authors transform those into actionable and valued recommendations for practitioners.

Cornerstone #3: A Strong Link between Primary Data and Recommendations

While *MIS Quarterly Executive* articles do not dwell on literature reviews, theory and methodology in the manner academic papers do, they must still be grounded in empirical evidence. Often this empirical evidence consists of one or more case studies, but rarely in survey and never with experiments featuring student subjects. Questions, such as "How does the data collected support the insights?" and "Do the recommendations follow from the data?" are just two questions that we ask.

Each article is evaluated by a Senior Editor and, only if he feels it has promise, by at least two individuals with familiarity with the area of research. Presenting primary evidence in detail is therefore vital to achieve credibility. While the final, published article usually will only describe the methodology briefly, and often in an appendix, be assured that independent authorities have been provided with, and carefully vetted, the underlying scholarship and evidence.

Our authors typically have taken one of two paths: they either use their *MIS Quarterly Executive* submission as a foray into a new topic and write the contents up as an in-depth exploration, or they write it up after they have written an academic version on the very same topic. From an editorial perspective, I have found the "after the academic paper" to be easier to write than the "before the academic paper" when it comes to establishing a link between data and recommendations, but both approaches are viable.

When writing an *MIS Quarterly Executive* article after the academic paper, the authors have already done the hard work. They have reached a point where they can focus solely on the linkage between data and findings and are less concerned with the execution of the methodology. In this case, *MIS Quarterly Executive* provides an outlet to pick and choose those data-recommendation linkages that were most surprising and of potential value to our audience.

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10 See Piccoli, G. "Editor's Comments," *MIS Quarterly Executive* (18:3), 2019, pp. i-v.

Writing an *MIS Quarterly Executive* article before the academic paper means that the empirical data collected is used to explore a problem set currently challenging practitioners and to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms at work. Here authors face a blank slate; they have an opportunity to make sense of the data and to infer recommendations; they can identify patterns and establish a frame to guide their subsequent work. While this approach may require more iterations with the Senior Editor, it is often far more closely tied to a real business problem or opportunity. Initial publication can also come more quickly.

In both cases, we encourage our academic authors to see *MIS Quarterly Executive* submissions as byproducts of, or forerunners to, rather than substitutes for publications in academic journals. This is an integrative solution: We want credible research from gifted scholars to buttress our papers, and we want those authors to succeed in their careers while learning how to effectively communicate and build relationships with practitioners.

Cornerstone #4: Clarity in the Write-up

We assume that our readers are practitioners and executives or senior managers. We recognize, however, that many will not be. Many of our papers are assigned by faculty for use in their classes, for instance. But these faculty and their students too value papers that are not obfuscated by methodological rigor, extensive literature reviews, and the details of statistical analysis. While we encourage papers written or co-written by practitioners, the majority of our papers are written by scholars.

As Allen Lee noted in one of our interviews: "Doctoral students before their indoctrination are interested in the world—in solving the problems of this world. Once they are professors, they lose that. There are not necessarily interested in branching off to writing for MISQE anymore because it is a completely different way of writing."

Most have long ago mastered the language of academia, and their initial submissions too often appear to have been written for other researchers. A major responsibility of our Senior Editors is to ensure that the final work is appropriate for a practitioner audience. For that, the writing style has to change and become approachable by a practitioner. Words like "hypotheses," "artifact," and "construct" are but three of many language clues indicating that authors are drifting off into academic writing.

For an *MIS Quarterly Executive* article, clarity is key.[11] It is often helpful to wonder about the following questions for each iteration: Does the paper convey one story from title to conclusion? Are the front and the back in harmony? Is the paper balanced with regards to strengths and weaknesses? Is there a figure or table that captures the essence (say, for classroom use)?

Writing takes time and practice, and the willingness to rethink and even discard what has been written. Sometimes, and only if the paper otherwise has promise, a Senior Editor might require a rewrite before it is even sent out for review—essentially to protect that promise from an adverse review based, for instance, on a misunderstanding of the target audience. More commonly, that "appropriate language" review is done after the paper has been found by the reviewers to have potential.

Once accepted, our professional copyeditor, David Seabrook, does a fantastic job to further craft the language for our audience. This is unique amongst IS journals. We also try to keep the papers short and recently lowered our word limit to 8,500 excluding abstract and references.

In sum, *MIS Quarterly Executive* articles, and the submissions that precede them, must have three ingredients beyond readability: They present a problem set that is relevant to current and future digital leaders; they identify an actionable set of recommendations; and they ensure that the data supports those insights. As a cross-check, we require an Addendum with each submission teasing out those cornerstones.[12]

MIS Quarterly Executive Announcements

As you will be aware if you are following *MIS Quarterly* Executive on LinkedIn, we are actively promoting the ICIS 2023 workshop for our Special Issue on "Managing Cybersecurity to Address Increasing Digital Risk." The special issue

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11 See Piccoli, G. "Editor's Comments," *MIS Quarterly Executive* (19:1), 2020, pp. i-v.
12 See our instructions for submission at https://aisel.aisnet.org/misqe/policies.html

is co-sponsored with the Society for Information Management (SIM). Stuart Madnick, Jeffrey Proudfoot and Mary Sumner are spearheading this effort and are looking forward to your submissions.

We are also pleased to announce that a new cadre of Senior Editors has joined the journal's board: Jan vom Brocke, Paul Di Gangi, Stefan Henningsson, Sirkka Jarvenpaa, Fred Niederman, Ilan Oshri, and Federico Pigni. Our new Editorial Board members are: Chon Abraham, Alexander Benlian, Walter Brenner, Kathryn Brohman, Thomas Hess, Munir Mandviwalla, Jeff Proudfoot, Michael Rosemann, and Alan Thorogood.

In this Issue

This issue has three research papers and one research conversation. The paper "How Shell Fueled Digital Transformation by Establishing DIY Software Development," written by Noel Carroll and Mary Maher, describes how Shell, an international energy company with 80,000 employees across more than 70 countries, introduced the Citizen Development program as a carefully orchestrated initiative and as part of their digital transformation strategy. Shell's journey is an example of how employees, empowered with the latest low-code-no-code tools can enable an organization's transformation from the bottom up.

Our second paper, titled "Boundary Management Strategies for Leading Digital Transformation in Smart Cities," is written by Jocelyn Cranefield and Jan Pries-Heje. Transforming cities into smart cities using advanced technologies is a complex task, requiring leaders to navigate uncharted territory, continuously finding new ways to solve problems together with a diverse set of stakeholders, all the while keeping the city's unique context in mind. Based on interviews with smart city leaders across five countries and three continents, the authors identify eight key challenges to sustaining and scaling-up smart city transformations—with boundary spanning, buffering, building, reinforcing and defending as central strategies.

The third research paper "Managing Where Employees Work in a Post-Pandemic World," written by Molly Wasko and Alissa Dickey, discusses the successful utilization of technology by a traditional manufacturing company and

the question: Should organizations require all employees to return to work, abandon expensive office space altogether, or settle somewhere in between in a post-pandemic world? The authors highlight the managerial obstacles encountered when business processes are virtualized and when faced with formulating a return-to-work strategy that needs to accommodate employees' changed expectations.

In the research conversation titled "Evolution of the Metaverse", the research team of Mary Lacity, Jeffrey K. Mullins, and Le Kuai are interviewed by Senior Editor Blake Ives about business implications of the metaverse. As organizations are faced with the metaverse and try to understand those immersive experiences in more detail for themselves and their customers, a lot of questions remain uncharted. The researchers report on some of the promises but also allude to possible dystopian aspects of virtual and augmented realities.

Enjoy reading and sharing those articles!

Iris Junglas
Editor-in-Chief