ICIS 2001 Proceedings

International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS)

December 2001

IS Research Relevance Revisited: Subtle Accomplishment, Unfulfilled Promise, or Serial Hypocrisy?

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IS RESEARCH RELEVANCE REVISITED: SUBTLE ACCOMPLISHMENT, UNFULFILLED PROMISE, OR SERIAL HYPOCRISY?

Chair: **Ned Kock**, Temple University

Panelists: **Paul Gray**, Claremont Graduate University
Ray Hoving, SIM International
Heinz Klein, Temple University
Michael Myers, University of Auckland
Jack Rockart, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

IS RESEARCH RELEVANCE: WHAT IS IT AND WHY BOTHER WITH IT?

The topic of IS research relevance has been receiving increasing attention from the IS research community. While debate on this topic has been taking place since the inception of the IS field, interest seems to have reached a new plateau recently, with several articles published in leading IS journals addressing issues related to IS research relevance. Among the issues addressed are the possible dichotomy between IS research relevance and rigor, the contribution of IS research to practitioners, and the pros and cons of using research approaches that bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners such as action research. In addition, there have been many recent discussions on the ISWorld listserve addressing issues related to IS research relevance.

Publications and postings on IS research relevance suggest much diversity in the opinions held by senior IS researchers. Some seem to think that current IS research is not relevant to practitioners, and that this will soon lead to a negative impact on the entire field. Others disagree, pointing out that what is often referred to as relevant research is simply IS consulting conducted with little research rigor. These divergent views, while providing fuel for much constructive debate and the development of new research paradigms, have at least one highly undesirable result: They create confusion in the minds of those who look up to senior IS researchers for guidance on how to begin their incipient IS research careers and what research paths to follow. Investing time and effort into a research path that is not likely to draw approval from the research community may have consequences that may go from mildly adverse, such as reduced social motivation stemming from lack of peer recognition and support, to devastating, such as denial of tenure or discontinuation of an academic appointment.

We believe that one major item is missing in the midst of the heated debate about IS research relevance: a definition of what IS research relevance means. Even though relevance is commonly equated with direct IS practitioner applicability of the results of the research, often the theoretical foundations on which such research builds are seen as practically irrelevant when published. This is true for many other fields as well. An example from the field of mathematics, where similar debates on research relevance exist, is George Boole's development of the modern symbolic logic, now known as Boolean algebra. In the mid-1800s, when it was developed, it hardly qualified as a contribution to the practical needs of anyone. Nevertheless, today it provides the foundation on which virtually all digital circuits are designed and without which computers would not exist (nor would the field of IS, incidentally). The lesson here is that contemporaries, be they practitioners or researchers, may not be in a good position to judge the relevance of research that may have great practical applications in the future. Another example closer to home is the discovery of relational databases, which were at first ridiculed as a theoretical toy.

GOAL AND FOCAL ARGUMENTS OF THE PANEL

The goal of this panel is to channel the current academic debate on IS research relevance by providing a framework for discussion that is centered on a broad definition of IS research relevance. The definition takes into consideration two main facets of IS

research relevance: *audience* and *scope*. The role that these two facets play in a broader understanding of IS research relevance is briefly discussed below.

➤ *Audience.* The audience of IS research includes industry practitioners and IS academics who in turn will produce more IS research. Even if a group of IS researchers produces research that is not of immediate use to industry practitioners, a second group of IS researchers can build on the publications of the first group and produce practitioner-relevant results. It is thus reasonable to argue that the research produced by the first group did possess indirect industry relevance in analogy to George Boole's research on symbolic logic.

➤ *Scope*. External validity, or generalization of findings beyond the scope of a research study, is a desirable characteristic of IS research. Yet lack of generalizability does not indicate practical irrelevance, because research findings that are highly contingent on specific characteristics of the environment being studied are often highly relevant at a local level. A case in point is action research, since the scope of relevance of IS action research findings to practitioners may vary significantly. For example, the outcomes of an action research study may be relevant to a single company, if the problems addressed through the research are specific to that company. The outcomes may be relevant to a whole industry, if the problems are faced by all (or most) companies in the industry; to a whole sector of the economy, if the problems are faced by all (or most) companies in the sector in question, and so on. Broad or narrow, the relevance will always be there, even when generalizabilty is not.

Based on the framework above, we will focus the panel discussion on three main arguments (or points of view) regarding IS research relevance that will be explored by the panelists. The first argument is that IS research is actually relevant although in a subtle way. The second argument is that the promise of conducting relevant research, which helped set the stage for the emergence of IS as an academic discipline in its own right, is still unfulfilled but in the path of being fulfilled. The third argument is that IS research relevance claims are nothing but hypocritical attempts by academics to maintain the status quo. These arguments are briefly discussed below.

IS Research Relevance: Subtle Accomplishment

The dwindling interest by industry practitioners in research published in "top-tier" IS journals (i.e., journals that are seen as representative of the best research in the IS field) is undeniable. Thus, it is difficult to argue that achieving research relevance has been a major accomplishment of the IS field.

However, the argument that IS research is relevant in a *subtle* way can be made based on one main conjecture, which is that IS research is highly relevant in an indirect way. That is, it can be argued that the type of IS research that is published in top-tier journals provides a foundation for relevant results and further relevant research. The recent discussion about the structure of knowledge in IS development (ISD) and the interpretation of ISD as knowledge work provides a good example for this claim. In addition, often such research is highly relevant as a *negative* pointer to practitioners, i.e., it does not tell them what to do, but is helpful to determine what *not* to do. This too can be observed in the literature on ISD. The lesson here is that high-quality IS research is broad in *scope* and that the primary *audience* for that research is individuals who then either apply that research in industry projects or use that research to produce research that is narrower in *scope* and thus closer to the needs of industry practitioners (such as consultants and action researchers).

IS Research Relevance: Unfulfilled Promise

The unfulfilled promise argument is not as self-congratulatory as the subtle accomplishment argument, as it maintains that the promise of conducting relevant research is still unfulfilled yet on the path of being fulfilled. It denies the subtle accomplishment argument by maintaining that the current IS research culture does not provide enough motivation for its *audience* to fulfill their role, that is, to apply that research in industry projects or use that research to produce research that is narrower in the *scope* of its relevance and thus closer to the specific needs of industry practitioners.

After all, those who can apply IS research in industry projects, such as consultants, have other sources of knowledge, such as books and magazine articles that address their needs more directly. Those willing to produce IS research that is narrower in *scope* and close to the specific needs of industry practitioners (e.g., action researchers) do not seem to have been given much space in top IS research journals (the percentage of action research studies published in top-tier IS research journals has been reported as

being close to 1% of the total). However, the unfulfilled promise argument maintains, this situation is slowly changing for the better.

IS Research Relevance: Serial Hypocrisy

The serial hypocrisy argument is that, while relevance to practice is frequently proclaimed as a virtue in public (espoused theory), in reality practical relevance does not matter (theory in use). What we say we believe and do is quite different to what we actually believe and do. Our existing values and practices, embedded as they are in longstanding institutional practices, ensure that the frequent calls for IS research to become more relevant to practitioners are doomed to fail.

These calls are doomed to fail because IS faculty are rewarded for publishing in the top research journals, as opposed to practitioner-oriented journals. Any IS faculty survey of IS journals shows that the more research-oriented journals are more highly regarded than other kinds of journals. The serial hypocrisy argument takes the view that proclaiming our relevance to practice (or saying we should be more relevant) is a very worthwhile activity, as long as young IS researchers do not take these proclamations too seriously. We must remember that IS research is done primarily for research's sake and for publication in top research journals.

PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel will have two main segments: *introduction and definition of IS research relevance* and *presentations and debate*.

Introduction and Definition of IS Research Relevance

This segment will start with Ned Kock providing a brief introduction of the panelists, a description of the goals and format of panel, and a definition of IS research relevance. Ned Kock will also briefly describe a Web site that will be created to enrich the panel discussion (see the "Panel Web Site" section below). The *presentations and debate* segment of the panel will begin immediately after this.

Presentations and Debate

In this segment, three of the panelists (Heinz Klein, Paul Gray, and Michael Myers), who are senior academics and have made important contributions to IS research, will discuss issues related to IS research relevance in ten minute presentation modules, illustrating their discussion with examples based on their own experiences.

A ten minute presentation module will follow in which two panelists, an academic who has a distinguished "relevant research" record (Jack Rockart) and an industry practitioner who has contributed to and made extensive use of IS research (Ray Hoving), will comment on the presentations by the three previous panelists, each using five minutes.

At the end of each of the five presentations, Ned Kock will invite the audience to provide their opinions and ask questions, which will be answered by the speaker and the other panelists. It is expected that this panel will feature a high level of interaction between audience and panelists, which will be moderated by Ned Kock. The speakers and IS research relevance topics discussed are as follows:

- Heinz Klein will discuss IS research relevance as a subtle accomplishment
- Paul Gray will discuss IS research relevance as an unfulfilled promise
- Michael Myers will discuss IS research relevance as serial hypocrisy
- Jack Rockart and Ray Hoving will discuss, from an industry-practitioner's perspective, the three views presented by Heinz Klein, Paul Gray, and Michael Myers.

Panel attendees will be given the opportunity to ask questions between individual presentations. In the remainder of the allotted time for this panel, the panelists will answer questions from the audience.

PANEL WEB SITE

Given the complexity and controversial nature of the topic and limited time available at the conference, a Web site will be created to provide additional information and extend this panel discussion beyond the conference. The Web site will be inaugurated approximately two months before the conference, and maintained as an archival resource indefinitely after the conference. The Web site will be available on the following URL:

http://www.mis.temple.edu/kock/ICIS01

The Web site will contain links to the panelists' personal Web pages, a RealVideo welcome message by the panel chair, a description of the panel, a listing of IS research relevance resources on the Web (including key references of relevance to the panel), and an online discussion forum. The online discussion forum will be open to the public and will receive postings from approximately two months before to two months after the conference, after which it will be kept as an archive.

ABOUT THE PANEL MEMBERS

Ned Kock is Director of the E-Collaboration Research Center and CIGNA Research Fellow in the Fox School of Business and Management, Temple University. He holds a Ph.D. in information systems from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. He is the author of three books, including the best-selling *Process Improvement and Organizational Learning: The Role of Collaboration Technologies*, and several articles in journals such as *Communications of the ACM*, *Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce*, *Information & Management*, *Information Systems Journal*, and *Information Technology & People*. Ned is co-editor of the *ISWorld Professional Ethics Section*, associate editor of the *Journal of Systems and Information Technology*, and member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Information Technology Cases and Applications*. He recently co-edited, with Francis Lau, a special issue of the journal *Information Technology & People* on Action Research in Information Systems. His home page is located at http://www.mis.temple.edu/kock/.

Paul Gray is Professor and founding chair of the Program in Information Science at Claremont Graduate University. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Communications of the AIS*. Paul developed and edited a special volume (Volume 6) of *Communications of the AIS* that presents 25 position papers on the subject of IS research relevance. He brings 18 years in industry and 30 years in academia to the discussion. Paul is the author of the first papers in telecommuting and group support systems. He has authored over 120 papers and is author or editor of 13 books. He is a Fellow of the AIS. His home page is located at http://www.cgu.edu/faculty/grayp.html.

Heinz Klein is Associate Professor in the Department of MIS at the Fox School of Business and Management at Temple University. He is also a member of the Academic Advisory Council of the Irwin L. Gross E-Business Institute at the Fox School. He formerly worked many years in the School of Business at SUNY Binghamton. From his many contributions to the published literature the one most pertinent for this panel is the paper on "Information Systems Research at the Crossroads: External vs. Internal Views" in *Organizational and Social Perspectives on Information Technology* (the proceedings of the IFIP 8.2 Working Conference in Aalborg, Denmark, June 10-12, 2000), R. Baskerville, J. Stage, and J. I. DeGross (eds.), Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston, 2000, pp. 233-254. His home page is located at http://www.mis.temple.edu/people/hklein.htm.

Michael D. Myers is Professor of Information Systems in the Department of Management Science and Information Systems at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests are in the area of information systems development, qualitative research methods in information systems, and the social and organizational aspects of information technology. Michael has co-authored three books and his articles have appeared in many academic journals. He received an award (with Heinz Klein) for the Best Paper published in *MIS Quarterly* in 1999. He currently serves as a senior editor of *MIS Quarterly*, as editor of the *University of Auckland Business Review*, as an associate editor of *Information Systems Research*, and as editor of the *ISWorld Section on Qualitative Research*. His home page is located at http//www.auckland.ac.nz/msis/isworld/MMyers/.

John F. (Jack) Rockart is the George and Sandra Schussel Distinguished Senior Lecturer of Information Technology at the Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He founded and was director of the Center for Information Systems Research for 25 years. He is best known for the development of the critical success factors (CSF) method and for the seminal articles which served to initiate the field of executive support systems (ESS). His current research interests include intranet portals and the future of the IT organization. He is editor-in-chief of *MIS Quarterly Executive*. His home page is located at http://web.mit.edu/cisr/www/html/rockart.html.

Ray Hoving is President of SIM International and of Ray Hoving and Associates, a firm that provides IT management consulting to leading companies. Prior to forming his consulting practice, he was Director of Information Technology Services for Air Products and Chemicals. He is widely recognized as a pioneer in assimilation of emerging information technologies into business environments. Ray has been an active member of the Society for Information Management for over 15 years. He was Vice President of Issues Advocacy in 1996/1997. He represented SIM in Washington as Chairman of the National Information Highway Advisory Council. He has also been Chairman of SIM's Philadelphia Area Chapter. Ray has lectured for the Advanced Management Program at the University of Pennsylvania, Babson College, the University of California at Los Angeles' Anderson School, the University of Virginia's Darden School Executive Education Program, and the Sloan School at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His home page is located at http://www.coba.unt.edu/isrc/hoving_bio.html.