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Panel 14 Is What We Know About Top Management Support Practically Useful? A Challenge to the Conventional Wisdom

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PANEL 14

IS WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TOP MANAGEMENT SUPPORT PRACTICALLY USEFUL? A CHALLENGE TO THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Panel Chair: **Chris Sauer**, Australian Graduate School of Management

Panelists: **Mark Keil**, Georgia State University
               Alex Qatsha, Deloitte & Touche Management Consultants

The conventional wisdom deriving from practice is that top management support is an unmitigated good for IS projects — so good, in fact, that the textbooks and research literature do not say what constitutes top management support, what function it serves, or how to obtain it.

The panel draws directly on practitioner knowledge and on study of practice to explore what we really know about top management support and to debate whether it is practically useful. The panel seeks to:

(1) draw out the unwritten wisdom of practice in relation to top management support;

(2) challenge the adequacy of the conventional wisdom;

(3) put the challenge to the test of debate.

The panel is structured as a dialogue.

Sauer presents examples of supportive top management activity from a highly successful Australian case. He explains the difference top management made. His reservations are that top management support cannot be confidently recognized in advance and that it is not readily managed. It is, he proposes, not a practically useful concept for IT professionals.

Qatsha counters that gaining top management support is an everyday necessity of consultancy. He therefore argues that top management support is susceptible to influence and explains some of the ways in which consultants approach the task.

Keil's concern is that practices, such as those presented by Qatsha, which positively influence top management support, may not always be so desirable. In some IS projects, organizations can exhibit "escalating commitment to a failing course of action" when senior management is so committed that it rejects the notion that the project is failing. In these situations, top management support is actually detrimental to getting the project back on track.

Keil and Qatsha will speak for fifteen minutes each. So as to maximize the sharing of practical experience, there will then be fifteen minutes for members of the audience to contribute techniques they use or know about for managing support and to comment on their experience with them. Sauer will then put his counterview before the final thirty minutes of audience and panel debate.