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Editor’s Comments

Pathways to Writing MIS Quarterly Executive Articles

At our SIM/ICIS workshop in December 2023, I found attendees, MIS Quarterly Executive prospective authors, to be keenly interested in learning how to write for the journal—and for other practice-oriented outlets for that matter. While academicians rarely receive formal training in practice-oriented writing, I was still surprised by the number of questions they asked.

In my June 2023 editorial, I proposed four cornerstones for guiding authors when submitting to MIS Quarterly Executive: 1) a novel and timely anchor; 2) the right-sized set of recommendations; 3) a strong link between primary data and recommendations; and (4) clarity in writing.\(^1\)

At the workshop it dawned on me that, in addition to the four cornerstones, I needed to also provide pathways to effectively achieve those objectives—even though the sequencing of the four cornerstones was indicative of a process that I had in mind at the time. Thus, in what follows, I offer pragmatic and actionable steps that authors might follow. This is not intended as a comprehensive approach or mandatory template. As you will see, I will use the word “typical” a lot. There are many non-typical MIS Quarterly Executive articles that have been, and should be, written that did not, or will not, follow this approach.

I envision a typical MIS Quarterly Executive article as having three sections: the front, which is rather short; the middle which is rather extensive; and, at the end, a set of recommendations that is often as extensive as the middle.

The Front of an MIS Quarterly Executive Article

The first cornerstone is the anchor, which sets the stage at the front of an article and convinces the editorial team that the topic is novel, relevant, even creative, and of interest to a practitioner audience as well as the upcoming generation of digital leaders. Often, it highlights a problem or an opportunity a digital leader might be struggling with.

There are many ways to identify a topic that is novel and relevant to practitioners. Topics can emerge from conversations with practitioners, from practitioner co-authors, from actively observing the world around us, from discussions in the classroom, from the media and, yes, from literature/theory as well.

In fact, and over time, I have seen two launch points for MIS Quarterly Executive articles. One is after the authors have published a theoretically grounded academic paper. The other is before such a paper is written; in this case, the MIS Quarterly Executive article will have an exploratory objective in mind and will often have no, or only little, theoretical backing in the academic sense. I call the former “retrospective” and the latter “explorative.” While both article types launch with different objectives, both have great potential to provide valuable contributions for digital leaders.

For example, the “explorative” type of article can be very timely—often much more so than can a “retrospective” article. Authors of an “explorative” article have identified a topic or a compelling lesson from practice that is so novel that academic research has not yet emerged. They typically conduct a qualitative study (often interviews) to understand the phenomenon in detail. Because there is no theory to call on, authors of “explorative” articles spend a significant amount of time going back and forth between data and interpretation. They are trying to make sense of what they have observed.

On the other hand, authors of “retrospective” articles have already evaluated the topic in detail, usually based on theory, and have found empirical evidence to support the theoretical expectations. Their academic studies may have revealed, perhaps as a byproduct, that their conclusions also apply to practitioners, but these conclusions will need to be significantly repackaged to be useful to, or even read by, that audience. (As a

caveat, I confess that some academic work, even that published in the finest journals, will not be of interest or useful to practitioners, no matter how it is well packaged. Though “explorative” and “retrospective” articles have different objectives in mind, it is important to note that both require empirical evidence—and not anecdotes—to be successfully executed. This is an important element for any MIS Quarterly Executive submission. Without it, authors will have a difficult time later demonstrating a strong link between primary data and recommendations—the third cornerstone I have previously proposed.

The Recommendation Section of an MIS Quarterly Executive Article
Before that, however, authors need to ensure the second cornerstone—the right-sized set of recommendations—is in place. After authors have identified a novel and timely topic, I typically challenge them to write down a set of recommendations. It might sound counter-intuitive and against traditional academic advice, but I find it to be a good litmus test that convinces the authors (and later the editors) that there is an article waiting to be written—or maybe not written.

Authors of a “retrospective” article may have included “recommendations for practice” near the end of their academic paper. However, these often fall short of being workable recommendations in two ways. First, authors may present mere findings for practitioners, which equates to a descriptive enumeration of the study’s outcomes. Second, they may present lessons learned, highlighting what organizations “should understand” and “could possibly learn” from their study. Recommendations are different. They are actionable suggestions that are non-obvious; they are doable and relevant for a category of problem sets.

By contrast, authors of an “explorative” article will have an easier time identifying a right-sized set of recommendations, usually because their research is grounded in practice rather than theory. They are often not encumbered by pre-existing academic findings and have more open minds that enable them to spot the unusual rather than confirming the expected. However, it may take them longer to identify recommendations because they must rigorously analyze their newly collected (often qualitative) data.

Remember that writing recommendations is an evolutionary process. Several iterations will be needed to arrive at the final set, and this process strongly influences how the middle section of the article is shaping up. Nevertheless, I strongly urge authors not to proceed with their article until they have an agreed initial solid set of recommendations.

The Middle Section of an MIS Quarterly Executive Article
The middle section of the article is admittedly the most difficult to pin down and provide advice on. In the most pragmatic sense, it functions as a bridge between the front end where the importance for the topic is argued and the back end where recommendations for action are presented. From an academic perspective, the middle section will have to combine literature review, method, analysis and findings into a coherent whole without overtly labeling it as such.

Depending on the type of study, a submission will focus on one of those elements in more detail without ignoring the others. For example, a “retrospective” article might provide a new model for thinking about a phenomenon and then dive into details of the empirical evidence supporting it with only a glancing reference to the analysis performed. An “explorative” article might provide a rich account of a case setting, describing the organization’s journey and the derived outcomes while ignoring any theoretical backdrop. This type of article might also provide a new framework (in the spirit of a grounded theory approach) that has not previously been identified. There are, of course, other focuses for both types of articles.

The middle section an MIS Quarterly Executive article must engage the target practitioner readers in a compelling and rich story so that they are not surprised when reaching the recommendation section, and find the listed recommendations insightful. Sounds simple, but transitioning from the middle section where the evidence is presented to a set of recommendations (i.e., the third of my cornerstones) requires artistry. My advice is that
authors must at all times have the target reader in mind—it is not one of your academic colleagues. Authors of “retrospective” articles should unchain themselves from the traditional outline required for an academic paper submission and instead find a new storyline. I often ask authors about what surprised them the most while analyzing the data, and if theory accounted for it. If the answer is “no,” they should consider why and use this as a starting point for developing a new angle. It is exactly those angles, which cannot be detected by solely putting theory first, that are of interest to MIS Quarterly Executive readers. “Retrospective” article authors should also ensure that the middle section is not decoupled from the recommendations. Often that requires them to iterate across all three elements of the middle section—i.e., evidence, recommendations and storyline—until a proper structure is found. Writing the middle section of an “explorative” article tends to be easier. Authors are not confined by theory and have the opportunity to develop a structure that is in line with their recommendations. However, they must ensure that rigor in execution “shines through.”

Though MIS Quarterly Executive articles do not emphasize methods (and often relegate them to the appendix), a submission has to convey that evidence was collected rigorously and that the conclusions drawn from the evidence are solidly grounded. When using case studies, for example, quotes play a major role in demonstrating that rigor. Without them, a reader cannot gauge the validity of the conclusions drawn, and the study is perceived by practitioner readers as “superficial” or “lacking in credibility.”

The Very Last Step
The fourth cornerstone is clarity in writing. This is not an afterthought but is of utmost importance for every element of an MIS Quarterly Executive submission. Interestingly, some of the best academic writers are also some of the best practice-oriented writers. While it takes effort to develop this skillset, I find it to be time well spent for any academician, young or old. Also, with the current advancements in generative AI, copyediting is becoming increasingly accessible to authors at low to no cost. Prompts can also include requests for clarity, brevity, professional tone and so on. I encourage our authors to use, but not overly rely on, these emerging tools in their quest to put the fourth cornerstone in place. To further assist you on this journey, we have a well-versed editorial team, one that is set out to be developmental in nature.

MIS Quarterly Executive Announcements
Make sure to submit to our special issue on “Fueling the Potential of Artificial Intelligence for Societal Impact,” spearheaded by Hind Benbya, Nigel Melville and Cynthia M. Beath. The deadline is April 1, 2024. This special issue seeks to improve understanding of the potential societal impacts of AI—both positive and negative—and to offer suggestions for increasing the positive impacts and solutions for preventing or minimizing the negative ones.

In this Issue
This issue has four research articles, two pieces from the Society for Information Management and one MISQE Insight piece.

The first research article, written by R. Ryan Nelson is titled “Transforming to Digital Product Management” and champions a transition from project management to digital product management with the objective of cultivating enterprises that are capable of flexibly adapting to escalating environmental uncertainties. The article features CarMax and The Washington Post as case studies.

The second article, written by Philipp Staudt and Rainer Hoffmann and titled “How a Utility Company Established a Corporate Data Culture for Data-Driven Decision-Making” describes how a German utility company transitioned to a culture that empowered its workforce, enhanced the data lifecycle and prioritized an employee-centered data management approach.

The third research article, titled “How the Odyssey Project Is Using Old and Cutting-Edge Technologies for Financial Inclusion” and written by Samia Cornelius Bhatti and Dorothy Leidner, recounts the experiences of The Odyssey Project, a startup endeavoring to create and introduce a contextually relevant digital solution for financially underserved communities.

And the fourth research article, titled “Leveraging Information Systems for Environmental
Sustainability and Business Value” is written by Anne Ixmeier and Franziska Wagner. It provides recommendations for harnessing information systems to generate sustainability and business value from environmental, social and governance initiatives.

This issue’s MISQE Insight piece, written by Graham Edmeads and Rick Watson, is on “Information Systems Due Diligence.” It underscores the importance of conducting thorough due diligence processes for information systems prior to making pivotal business decisions.

The “2023 SIM IT Issue and Trends Study,” conducted by Vess Johnson, Chris Maurer, Russell Torres, Katia Guerra, Hossein Mohit, Smriti Srivastava and Sourav Chatterjee, marks the 43rd iteration of this endeavor, aimed at comprehensively understanding the challenges encountered by organizations and their IT leaders. This year’s study analyzes the survey responses from 671 IT executives and provides invaluable insights into the dynamic landscape of technology and business.

A standout finding from the trends study is the phenomenal growth in business interest in deploying AI. In a companion piece, “Responding to the Sharp Rise in AI in the 2023 SIM IT Trends Survey,” Quintin McGrath, the new Executive Director of the SIM Research Institute, delves deeper into the use of AI, along with its opportunities and challenges for organizations.

Enjoy reading and sharing those articles!

Iris Junglas
Editor-in-Chief