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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL VOLUME ON RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces the CAIS special volume on relevance. It provides an overview of how the volume came to be, describes the relevance issue, and indicates the range of opinions expressed.

KEYWORDS: Relevance, Special Volume

I. HISTORY OF THIS VOLUME

On February 8, 2001, Deepak Khazanchi of the University of Nebraska at Omaha posted the seven responses he received to a November 8, 2000 ISWorld inquiry on the relevance of IS research to industry. On the next day Khazanchi posted a "belated response" from Detmar Straub, who was out of the country. These two items set up a firestorm of ISWorld messages, involving more than 30 people. The messages were collected by Sophie Cockcroft of the University of Queensland [Cockcroft 2001a, 2001b] in an ISWorld archive (see Appendix II to this article). By February 17, the firestorm was over, with only 2 more posts after that.

Like many of the other 4000 subscribers to ISWorld, I was fascinated by the depth of the emotion displayed and by the range of responses. Clearly the relevance of academic research to the broader community is a raw nerve ending for IS faculty throughout the world.

This debate on relevance was not a new phenomenon. It has been going on in the IS community for years. It flared in ISWorld several times previously and is likely to do so again. Senior IS people wrote about it in our journals¹. CAIS published Ralph Westfall's 'Manifesto' [Westfall, 1999]. Given the intensity of the debate, I decided to e-mail 30 of the participants and ask them to write a 2 to 4 page position paper on relevance. The call for opinion papers (Figure 1) went out on February 16 with the request that people submit no later than 1 March.

The results of this call were remarkable. Most of the participants promised to send papers. Only a few were unable to do so. One (Straub) was overseas. Some others were overloaded and felt they could not make the deadline. In addition, a number of people who had heard about my invitation asked if they too could respond. In all, 26 articles were received and it was clear that a special volume of CAIS was called for.

Dear:

I would like to publish a discussion on relevance in Communications of AIS. I am therefore inviting a number of people who participated in the e-mail discussion, including you, to submit a short position paper (2-4 pages) that expands your remarks for inclusion in a CAIS article. I will edit the article and I reserve the right to accept/reject. Putting it all together in the journal will create a permanent record in one place that I believe the profession needs.

My deadline is Thursday 1 March. Could you let me know by return e-mail as to whether or not you will participate?

Regards

Paul Gray

Figure 1. Call for Articles

I am grateful to the authors for being most helpful in responding quickly with their contributions and then undertaking the necessary revisions and proofreading on an accelerated schedule. The total time from the end of the ISWorld debate to publication was under four weeks.

II. THE SURVEY

As the debate raged in ISWorld, Larry Press of California State University at Dominguez Hills, a distinguished columnist on the effect of the PC on computing in the Communications of ACM, ran a survey about relevance. The results, published in IS World on February 23, 2001 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Relevance Survey Results by Larry Press

Which is most important for your research and writing?	Number	Percent
Research publications like MISQ and JAIS	176	82.6%
Practitioner publications like HBR and SMR	22	10.3%
Trade publications like NetworkWorld, InfoWorld and ComputerWorld	13	6.1%
NA	2	0.9%
Which is most important for your teaching?		
Research publications like MISQ and JAIS	27	12.7%
Practitioner publications like HBR and SMR	88	41.3%
Trade publications like NetworkWorld, InfoWorld and ComputerWorld	89	41.8%
NA	9	4.2%
Which is most important for your consulting and applied work?		
Research publications like MISQ and JAIS	18	8.5%
Practitioner publications like HBR and SMR	75	35.2%
Trade publications like NetworkWorld, InfoWorld and ComputerWorld	78	36.6%
NA	42	19.7%
Which would you prefer to attend?		
A trade show like Interop or Comdex	22	10.3%
An executive forum run by a consulting company like Giga or Forrester Research	62	29.1%
An academic conference like AMCIS or ICIS	125	58.7%
NA	4	1.9%
Number of responses	213	100.0%

The survey was limited to two publications from each of three streams:

- high quality research (MISQ and ISR),
- leading magazines for senior practitioners (Harvard Business Review and Sloan Management Review)
- the computer trade press (NetworkWorld, InfoWorld, and ComputerWorld)

and three different professional meetings. The table clearly shows that, for the sample of 213 respondents, the research journals are used for research work and the other journals are used for teaching, consulting, and applications. It also implies that academics read all three forms of publications.

IV. THE RELEVANCE ISSUE

The relevance issue concerns the importance of academic IS research to the practitioner community. One side argues that academics in IS do and publish research that is neither seen nor used by people in the field. The other side quotes the large number of successes achieved over the years².

Almost without exception, the authors of the position papers believe that IS research should be relevant. Yet, there seems to be consensus that our published work is not being read by practitioners. The reasons given range from the abstractness of the research to the quality of the writing to the lack of practical experience of faculty. A particular point of concern is the long time between an invention in industry and the publication of academic research about the invention. The argument is that by the time the IS academic publication appears, the issue is no longer of interest to practitioners because the latter already moved on to the next invention. A second concern is the failure to focus on applications for non-business constituencies such as the public sector and the community use of computing.

What authors propose to do about the problem is often determined by where they are in their career. People facing tenure argue that tenure committees only look at the two or three top journals, which they say do not publish relevant material (although, I am sure the editors of these journals would dispute this assertion). As one author says in his title "You Get What You Reward" Some argue that academia should appoint people with vast practical experience or train practitioners to be PhD's who teach so that the practice view is represented. Others point to the need for better writing and marketing of what we do. Still others advocate that we follow the medical and engineering model of both teaching and practice as well as research. As one author says, too much of our discussion is on a unidimensional "either/or" basis (rigor/relevance; theory/practice; basic/applied) rather than on a 'both/and' basis.

Of interest is the different viewpoints of academia and industry. Academics are quite hard on themselves, faulting the relevance of their work. Several practitioners who contribute to this volume, however, see much good in what we do and take a much more benign view of our efforts.

The bottom line is in the title of one of the contributions: "The Relevance of IS Academic Research: Not as Good As It Can Get"

V. CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

Among the responses were two that serve as natural beginnings and ends. Robert L. Glass, the distinguished columnist for the Communications of ACM, prepared "*Rigor vs. Relevance: A Practitioner's Eye View of an Explosion of IS Opinions*" in which he selected "pithy" quotations from the ISWorld messages and organized them by topic. His paper follows this one. Glass does a superb job of organizing the comments and setting the stage for what follows.

This initial article is followed by 24 position papers that range in length from 5 to 10 pages in CAIS format³. For simplicity (and to avoid even the possibility of bruised egos) these papers are presented in alphabetical order of last name.

The final paper, Article 27 by Nik Dalal, "What Does it All Mean? A Meta-Inquiry" points to the future. Dalal presents an extensive series of questions about how to approach the issue of research relevance and whether there is an objective truth with respect to relevance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current discussion is certainly not the last one on relevance. If history is a predictor, the issue will come to the fore every several years. The Editor of CAIS hopes that the set of papers presented in this volume will serve as a baseline that will raise future discussions to a new level and will bring additional insights for us all.

END NOTES

1 Among those cited are articles by Benbasat and Zmud [1999], Davenport and Markus [1999], Keen [1991], Lee [1999], Lyytinen [1999], Markus [1997], and Robey and Markus [1998]

2 A list of the contributions of academia to IS, based on the articles in this volume and the ISWorld debate are listed in Appendix I.

3 The length of the articles indicates that most of our colleagues find it hard to stay inside tight space limits.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The call for papers for this special issue was e-mailed to participants in the ISWorld debate on February 18, 2001. The first response was received on 21 February and the last on March 8, with most making the March 1, 2001 draft deadline. Papers 1 through 27 in this volume were published on March 13, 2000. Each paper falls into the Opinion category of contributions to CAIS.

REFERENCES

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following reference list contains the address of World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their word processor or are reading the paper on the Web, can gain direct access to these references. Readers are warned, however, that

1. these links existed as of the date of publication but are not guaranteed to be working thereafter.
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3. the authors of the Web pages, not CAIS, are responsible for the accuracy of their content.
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APPENDIX I

ACADEMIA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO IS PRACTICE

The purpose of this appendix is to list some of the academic achievements reported in this volume that contributed over the years to the practice of information systems. The appendix includes material from both the ISWorld debate and from the articles that follow in this volume.

The listing is in the order found by the editor in the sources. Some duplications exist . The format of the attributions differs among sources, and some have been edited.

The important point is that the set of academic contributions is not empty.

- Decision support systems (Michael Scott Morton, et al)
- Group support systems (various)
- Entity-relationship modeling (Peter Chen, et al)
- Technology adoption model and other similar models of how IT is adopted and diffused in organizations (various)
- Competitive advantage models and frameworks (e.g., Harvard Business School)
- Strategic alignment: N.Venkatraman and John Henderson:
- IS/User partnerships:
- Lack of social context cues in computer mediated communication(Email)
- Duality of technology : (IT is a medium of action and as constraint on behavior)
- Productivity paradox (countering the facile arguments of industry)
- Multi-disciplinary nature of information systems (e.g., socio-technical perspective)
- IS/IT as a strategic resource:
- IS effectiveness measures:
- Business process reengineering as a form of organizational change:
- Information systems architectures.
- Mintzberg how managers use information
- Simon □ steps in decision making
- Tversky, Kahneman, Slovic, et al - common flaws in decision making
- Markus □views of user resistance
- Hammer and Champy - reengineering examples
- Standish Group - failure rates of information systems
- Ives and Olsen - different levels of user involvement
- Neumann - information system risks

- Mason - PAPA (privacy, accuracy, property, access) framework for ethical issues
- Sviokla - how the implementation process affects success
- Brown and Vessey - NIBCO big bang ERP implementation
- Broadbent and Weill - business maxims and IT maxims
- Chen □ entity-relationship diagrams
- Ives and Learmonth - customer involvement cycle
- Davenport and Prusak - knowledge management
- Simon - without a question I believe his contributions are seminal to our field; we call him our own although I am not sure whether economists and computer scientists (and numerous other research communities where Simon contributed) will agree with us.
- Shannon's mathematical theory of communication; (DeLone and McLean's oft-cited paper on IS success bases its IS success model on Shannon and Weaver's theory of communication)
- Weiner on Cybernetics.
- Scott-Morton's description of the fundamental concepts of MIS plus his work on DSS later with Keen.
- Ackoff's on similarly describing the fundamental concepts about systems and MIS
- Keen on fundamental MIS concepts; plus his work on DSS (The field of DSS has come a long way since then and one of the most important areas of impact is in the current B2B e-commerce solutions)
- Chen on ER modeling revolutionized our approach to systems analysis and design
- Codd on Relational Databases (although computer scientists will claim his work to be seminal to their field rather than to MIS, although his theory of RDBMSs shaped Information Systems into what they are today).
- Miller on cognitive limits (which became the basis for all our modeling schemas in IS).
- Newell and Simon on human information processing.
- Tversky and Kahnemann on decision making under uncertainty (once again psychologists may call this work seminal in their field)
- Checkland on soft systems thinking
- Mumford on socio-technical systems
- Churchman's on systems theory and the philosophical foundations of information systems
- von Bertalanffy on general systems theory
- Langefors on general information systems theory
- Weinberg on systems theory, software engineering, and software quality
- Brooks on software engineering and project management (The Mythical Man Month; No Silver Bullet)
- Rockart on Critical Success Factors.
- Cougar on systems methodologies, computer personnel, and creativity
- Tiechrow with Konsynski, Nunamaker, and Welke on CASE technology

APPENDIX II

TRANSCRIPT OF THE ISWORLD DEBATE

The ISWorld debate was archived by Prof. Sophie Cockcroft of the University of Queensland. It can be found by hyperlinking to:

<http://www.commerce.uq.edu.au/isworld/research/>

This URL contains the *Archive of Research Information Solicited via ISWorld*.

The two items that contain the debate are dated 23 February 2001 and are titled:

Discussion of IS Relevance 08-February-01 to 21-February-01

Discussion of IS Relevance 08-February-01 to 21-February-01 Subthread on IS Theory/Practice.

Select these items to see the transcripts.

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