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Murray E. Jennex

San Diego State University, mjennex@mail.sdsu.edu

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RESEARCH RELEVANCE – YOU GET WHAT YOU REWARD

Murray E. Jennex

San Diego State University e-mail

mjennex@mail.sdsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This article argues that IS research is not relevant to the practitioner community due to the tenure-based reward system. It shows that long delays between performing research and publishing in a top journal make our research less timely and useful to practitioners. Teaching and publishing loads give our junior faculty less time to gain practical experience through working with practitioners; and if they do, their focus on the underlying general theory makes them ill prepared to solve specific practitioner problems. Adjuncts and Lecturers are not solutions. The tenure system makes these positions second class. It is suggested that publishing requirements be loosened to allow more of our work to be published in practitioner-oriented or lower level journals and conferences. Encourage gaining practical experience by broadening what is considered for tenure and consider granting Lecturers tenure. Finally, shorten publication times by increasing the use of electronic journals and publishing.

Is our research relevant to the IT practitioner community? Many argue it is not since practitioners do not read our journals or attend our conferences, at least not in large numbers. I believe our research is not relevant because being relevant to the practitioner community is not what we are rewarded for. My viewpoint is based on my history. This semester is my first as a full time member of academia. I spent the previous five years as a full time practitioner and part-time adjunct faculty. During the prior fifteen years I was a full time practitioner and part time student.

As a practitioner I used performance management to influence workers to perform as desired. Goals, measurements, and rewards were the tools to influence performance. Is it any different in academia? Tenure is the reward for faculty who exhibit excellence in teaching and scholarship. Tenure requirements set the standards and measures for excellence in teaching and scholarship. Goals are set relative to teaching evaluations and publishing since these performance elements can be measured. It is these measures that I contend drive us away from relevancy to the practitioner community.

Scholarship is measured by the quantity and quality of our publications in the form of journal articles, books, and conference proceedings. Quality is judged by the severity of the review process and the acceptance rate. Many universities have a journal and conference rating system such as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Journal Characteristics

LEVEL	CHARACTERISTICS
A	Double blind reviews and low acceptance rates. Accepted articles reflect good scholarship. They are well written, bounded in theory and methodology, present new theory, and identify limitations to the conclusions. They are application to the general issue.
B	As rigorous as the top tier. They differentiate from the top tier by their appeal to more specialized groups and their narrower focus. Hence, they are perceived a little easier to obtain article acceptance because there is less competition.
C	The less rigorous academic journals and conferences and the top-rated practitioner journals and conferences. They are "C" because they have lower standards of academic rigor. They also tend to have more generalized appeal to a broader, non-academic audience
D	The general practitioner magazines and conferences. Articles accepted for publication in this tier are evaluated based upon mass appeal and timeliness. Little academic rigor is applied.

The process, particularly for the "A" and "B" journals and conferences, results in a long delay between the time the research is performed and the time the article appears in the journal or conference. This long delay, together with the focus on scholarship, tends to make these journals and conferences lack appeal to practitioners. Practitioners look for current information on which they can act and have little time for information that can be three years old.

When our scholarship is assessed for tenure, it is vastly more important to have the "A" and "B" journal and conference hits. It is nice to have "C" and "D" journal and conference hits but they do nothing for the assessment and they do not earn us tenure. Therefore, we spend our time concentrating on those journals and conferences dedicated to academia and spend little time producing research and publications that appeal to practitioners.

I can attest to this state of affairs from my own participation in the process. I have been (and contributed) to the "A" and "B" conferences which are theory oriented and found little there of interest to me as a practitioner and observed little participation by practitioners. My own publications reflect the need to appeal to the academic audience and the "A" or "B" journals, and I admit, they have little appeal to practitioners. I also attended (and contributed) to our conferences that stress application and found these to be significantly behind the practitioner world. Although I have many years of practitioner experience, I now research and write to appeal to the academic world knowing well that what I am doing will have little interest to my practitioner friends. I have not sold out. I am simply performing according to the reward system in which I work.

The second major category for tenure is teaching. I have been told many times that good teaching is extremely important, though this goal varies in importance according to the focus of the institution. Research-focused universities stress publication over teaching. I already discussed how our research is focused on academia, so it follows that our research universities are not necessarily relevant to the practitioner world. This is also true in our teaching-focused universities. While these universities emphasize the need for good teaching, they do not necessarily reward activities that lead to good teaching. Tenure requirements focus on teaching evaluation and publication. Students crave teachers who have done what they teach and say so in evaluations. What makes me a good teacher is being able to relate the theory to actual

practice. However, our reward system does not encourage us to be in practice. Working as a consultant does not fit in the tenure requirements. We address this issue by hiring practitioners. I have been an Adjunct and have talked to other Adjuncts. It is not uncommon for universities to have Adjuncts teach the skill classes (programming, database, telecommunications). I have been in interviews where, if you were a practitioner and didn't want to do the "A" journal research, you would be offered the "Lecturer" positions. Both Lecturer and Adjunct are second-class positions. Neither can achieve tenure and are second class because only the tenure positions get to vote on academic issues and have the freedom that tenure offers.

What would improve our teaching? More than anything else gaining practical experience would improve our ability to relate to students. By relating better to students we become better teachers. Unfortunately, who has time to work outside of academia? Junior faculty are loaded with classes and publishing expectations. There is no time to be a practitioner. Also, on those occasions where we can gain experience by consulting, our research and academic training hurts us. I have observed several faculty in the field as consultants. Many do not do well because they cannot provide the insight necessary to solve the specific problems that practitioners have. They do well providing strategic advice or the theory that applies, but have little insight into how to apply it.

Put it all together and it appears that we are getting exactly what we are rewarding: research that is not timely or relevant to the applied world but which fits the academic world. Can we change it, or do we even want to change it? We are good scholars. Our work is good scholarly work. I have heard many of us argue that we need to concentrate on the field of knowledge and not worry about relevance. I do not claim to have the answer, but I think we need to at least allow for us to achieve practitioner proficiency and relevance.

To accomplish this goal, I offer the following suggestions for improving the reward system: First, equalize the journal ratings. Make all journal hits worth the same. I think many of us would jump at the chance to do research that is publishable in an applied publication. Think of it as marketing. If the practitioner community starts to see academics publishing in their journals they are going to start associating us with relevant research. Shorten publication delay times by increasing the use of electronic publishing.

Apply this approach to conferences, open them up, allow equal time to the papers that show that the theory works as well as those that create the theory. I believe we will get much more interest in what we have to say.

Finally, on tenure, we need to re-think what constitutes tenurable work. Perhaps we count practitioner experience when assessing tenure. Another option is to allow Lecturers to gain tenure. It is not suggested that we drop scholarship requirements, but expand them to include a broader definition of what constitutes scholarly activities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Murray E. Jennex recently joined San Diego State University where he teaches system analysis and design, database, and IS management. Previously he served as a project manager for Southern California Edison's Nuclear Information Systems group and as the project manager responsible for embedded systems and contingency planning for Edison International's Y2K project. Dr. Jennex is also a registered professional mechanical engineer and prior to earning his Ph.D., spent fifteen years managing engineering projects and designing and implementing engineering IS solutions. He is still an active member of the ANSI 56.8 standards committee for nuclear containment leak rate testing.

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