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## Industry-Academia Interaction: Key to IT Relevance

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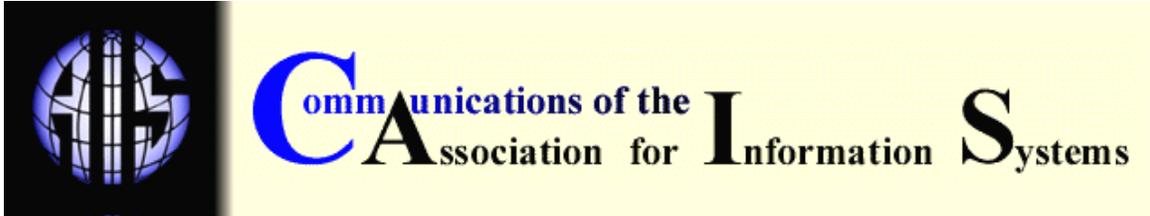
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## INDUSTRY – ACADEMIA INTERACTION: KEY TO IT RELEVANCE

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### ABSTRACT

Much of the discussion on the relevance of IS academic research to industry tends to take sides. I propose that it would be more constructive if the interaction with industry is recognized and nurtured. I suggest that to stay up to date, IS professors and doctoral students should actively interact with the industry and also encourage industry professionals to collaborate with IS academic programs.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This position paper presents a view that interaction between industry and academia is key to the 'relevance' debate. I am a full-time information systems professional in industry and also involved in teaching and research. I hope this paper will bring additional perspective to the discussion. The recent debate on ISWorld appeared to suggest that there is a great divide between the academic researchers and practitioners. This position paper suggests that, through interaction, a mutually beneficial relationship can evolve between academia and industry. I also argue that this interaction is already happening, although more is needed.

### II. INTERACTION BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

The industry-academia interaction should begin when future researchers are doctoral students and should continue well after they start their careers. Many doctoral programs prefer that students exclusively work within the program and not take up work in the industry while in the program. They fear that students' involvement in industry work will distract them from the doctoral work. My position is that students' interaction with industry should be considered part of the education. It provides appropriate research topics, funding, and, more importantly, access to data for research. In addition, industry provides an opportunity for employment outside the traditional academic setting. This option may not be an appealing alternative today when the demand for IS PhDs exceeds the supply, however, such was not the case just a few years ago. For example, at a time when IS Ph.D. candidates in the academic job market exceeded the number of openings, the doctoral consortium of the Decision Sciences Institute national conference in Washington D.C. (1993) offered presentations on how to find industry jobs.

### III. INTERACTION BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND INDUSTRY

I disagree with the original comment in the debate that businesses don't care about academic research. As a matter of fact, many academic research topics come from issues that exist within industry e.g. studies on ERP implementation; studies indicating that EDI payoffs are different for the hub organizations than those of the spoke organizations; impediments to Electronic Commerce; and payoff from IT investment. One would hope that the research in academic

institutions then feeds managers' decision-making, although it is true that some amount of research is meant for the consumption of other researchers.

The point made in the original comment that "The important work is done by corporations, the government, or individuals in the pursuit of profit." is well taken. However, I would argue that this state of affairs does not necessarily exclude academic research. Many people doing the research for corporations and governments are also academicians e.g. Stiroh and Jorgensen (Harvard and the Federal Reserve) and Bob Gordon (Northwestern and NBER). Several academic researchers profit from their research through business books and industry consulting and speaking engagements. Therefore, academic research and the pursuit of profit are not mutually exclusive. I say the above from a personal perspective. I work for a large healthcare company with an IS staff of 700+. Although not all our managers read scholarly journals, many are interested in the current research. Several have co-authored articles in IS and healthcare journals as well as book chapters and case studies. Many serve as guest speakers, panelists, and adjunct faculty in academic settings. At the same time, many managers attend executive education classes sponsored by universities. Our consultants are 'up' on latest research as well as practice. The case in point is that there is interaction between business and research to mutually address each other's problems or issues.

Another way of facilitating interaction between academia and industry is for professors to take sabbaticals at business organizations in their field of expertise. Such involvement will facilitate mutual understanding of each other's strengths and challenges. Conversely, programs that have senior IS professionals in residence for periods of a year or more provide benefits to the entire IS faculty. During such residency period, IS professionals share with IS faculty the challenges facing them, and then return to industry with a deeper appreciation for the role of academic research in business problem solving.

We need not set expectations that researchers cannot produce 'relevant' research. Neither should we assume that managers are incapable of understanding and appreciating rigorous academic research. It is not a 'one or the other' issue, there is much overlap that can be exploited.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Rajiv Kohli is an internal Consultant and Project Leader - Decision Support Services at the corporate office of Trinity Health. He is also an adjunct Assistant Professor in the Management Department at the University of Notre Dame. Dr. Kohli received his PhD in 1994 from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County campus. Dr. Kohli has worked or consulted with MCI Telecommunications, Westinghouse Electronics, and Rohbe Corporation in addition to several healthcare organizations. Dr. Kohli's research is published in *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *Decision Support Systems*, *Information & Management*, and *Journal of AIS* among other journals.

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