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Communications of the **A**ssociation for **I**nformation **S**ystems

A BROADER VIEW OF RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

The question of the relevance of MIS research to practitioners is part of the broader question of the match between academic research goals and the goals of constituents. We call for a broader conception of who those constituents might be, and the implications that has for the activities of MIS academics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of MIS research to practitioners is part of a larger issue: the match between an MIS faculty member's goals and those of his or her constituents. Constituents' goals vary, of course. Most undergraduate MIS students want to learn skills for the job marketplace. Business executives are interested in the strategic potential of IT. Universities want funding and prestige.

For most of us, research goals coexist with teaching goals, institutional service goals, professional service goals, and more. Consider the set of goals we pursue our goal profile. Our goal profiles include (and are partially derived from) our personal goals.

In our view, "relevance" is the extent to which an MIS faculty member's activities serve his or her constituents' goals. Practitioner relevance is only an issue if the faculty member's constituents include practitioners. Practitioners are not all the same, of course. Activities that might interest a database administrator might not interest a trainer.

Academics face several problems in doing relevant research. First, constituents' goals often are not articulated, or not articulated very well. Goals change as business, academic, and technical environments change. Further, the goals of a particular individual change over time.

Second, MIS academics have limited resources. They are dwarfed by those available to many practitioners, and are puny compared to those of the largest MIS corporations. It seems unreasonable to expect MIS academics to publish solutions to important problems before the industry moves on.

Third, the academic reward system values some work more than others. For example, research on MIS teaching attracts relatively few accolades. It isn't clear that work practitioners judge as relevant is rewarded very highly either.

Fourth, there is the relative worthiness of constituents' goals. Suppose a faculty member is employed at a public university. What research justifies the taxpayers' investment in her salary? Is justification even an issue? Should she just pursue her own intellectual interests, regardless of their benefit to those supporting her?

We can't answer all of these questions. But we can make some suggestions to MIS faculty, the institutions that employ them, and the academic community to which they belong.

II. GOAL PROFILES FOR MIS FACULTY MEMBERS

If you want to do relevant research, seek a match between a constituent's interests and your own. You can identify the goals of your current constituents and assume those. You can choose your own goals and look for constituents with similar interests. Perhaps some combination of the two will be the most effective.

Whatever you do, you should try to be honest with yourself and others. For example, if you want to help practitioners with requirements analysis for enterprise systems, it is unlikely that a lab study with college freshmen will be of much use. Case studies and action research are more likely to generate relevant results; that is, results that actually help people doing requirements analysis for enterprise systems. Be realistic about what you can achieve. If you teach four classes per semester, it is unlikely you can solve the latest problem in B2B e-commerce before it becomes history.

Of course, "be honest" is a value statement. You can choose to deceive others, and even yourself. You can adopt the appearance of relevance, jumping from topic to topic without any intention of helping the constituents you claim to serve. If you choose this strategy, at least acknowledge to yourself that you are not serving anyone's interests but your own.

This isn't to say that your own interests are unimportant. Quite the contrary. For most people, rewarding work is important to personal happiness. The key is working out what "rewarding" means to you. In the best of worlds, what you find rewarding will also serve your chosen constituents.

Sometimes you need to be creative in the search for relevance. For example, the first author studies the use of IT in moral growth, that is, how IT can help people develop an ethical perspective, and use it in making difficult choices. Morality is an issue close to his heart, as it is for many of the citizens who pay his salary. Further, despite the limited resources at hand, the research might have an impact on constituents' lives. True, it isn't a traditional MIS topic, and has nothing to do with "business" or "IS practice," at least not directly. But it does have the hallmarks of relevance.

III. GOAL PROFILES FOR INSTITUTIONS

Most institutions favor some constituents over others, even if only implicitly. Ideally, those institutions would recruit for, reward, and support activities serving their chosen constituents. They would recognize that individual faculty members can't be everything to everyone. They might hire different people for different parts of their goal profile, and measure their performance differently.

This situation often doesn't occur, of course. Many schools have a variety of goals, but a single reward system that cannot recognize different goal profiles. At the least, however, each school should decide which goal profiles it considers reasonable.

IV. GOAL PROFILES FOR THE MIS DISCIPLINE

The discipline should support academic communities with different goal profiles. The communities might only be loosely associated with one another, since they are likely to favor different research

questions and methods. For example, business strategy researchers might use case studies, teaching researchers might use experiments, and technology management researchers might use action research. The standards of one group should not be used to judge another, without due reflection on differences in goals and constraints.

Most important of all, the academy should not arrogantly deny the legitimacy of different goal sets. The greatest danger is that the discipline will choose a goal set that is not tenable for many faculty members, and then demand that everyone subscribe to it. The result? Lip service to the goals, publications that seem to serve them but actually do not, and growing cynicism about the MIS field.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

For each of us: Know yourself. Know your constituents. Seek a match.

For institutions: Choose goal profiles. Match recruiting, reward, retention, and market positioning to those profiles.

For the MIS discipline: Recognize goal diversity. Value different goals. Support communities with different goal profiles.

We'd like to end on an introspective note. Everyone reading this is an individual, with his or her own fears and aspirations. Every hour you devote to research is gone forever. What do *you* want from those hours?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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