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THE RELEVANCE OF IS ACADEMIC RESEARCH: NOT AS GOOD AS IT CAN GET

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ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed that IS practitioners do not read academic research. Does it imply that research is irrelevant to practice or does not inform practice? While I believe that this is not the case, and that dissemination does take place, I am concerned because I believe that academic research should be readable and accessible to practitioners. I suggest that writing for practitioners should be rewarded, but only as a complement to and based upon academic research. Academic research should address important and interesting issues. It should be relevant to audiences other than businesses, such as the non-profit and public sectors and society at large.

I. THE DEBATE

The debate about IS relevance was triggered by the following comment posted to ISWorld:

There are probably no academic findings of any importance in IT and few, if any, from business schools in general. The evidence is simply that few, if any, business people bother to waste their time with academic journals. Certainly, managers at Microsoft, Sun, Intel, etc. spend no time with academic findings. The important work is done by corporations, the government, or individuals in the pursuit of profit.

Even though an inference about the relevance of IS academic research for practice is being made from the observation that "business people" don't read academic journals, this posting is thought provoking. Rather than viewing this comment as "myopic", I choose to see in it a cry of distress or despair, albeit laced with simplified assumptions: academic research should affect practice, even lead it, but it is not doing so.

Let's take the observation first. From personal experience, anecdotal evidence, and conversations with both academics (some very prominent names in IS) and practitioners, I agree fully that business people do not read academic journals - or most practitioner literature either. There is even published research that supports this. For example, Mintzberg's seminal set of studies on managerial work show that about 10-15 minutes is the span of attention busy executives devote to a single problem and that they prefer verbal to written media, and current chats and speculations to reports. In other words, they do not read much.[Mintzberg, 1973]. However, it is a leap of inference then to conclude that academic research is not relevant, and by implication, academic research does not inform practice.

II. THE VIEWS

It appears to me that academia can take at least 3 different views of this state of affairs:

The first view is that we in academia do not do relevant research, and thus do not inform practice. This view is attributed to the reward system in academia where tenure and promotion, and indeed reputation, is achieved through "scholarly" work evidenced by publication in academic journals such as *MIS Quarterly* and *ISR*. These journals are theory-oriented, which implies that practitioners have no interest. Publication in practitioner outlets such as *DM Review* or *Information Strategy* is not only un-rewarded, but even frowned upon

The second view acknowledges that practitioners do not read academic publications but attributes this lack of reading to the perspective that "practice" and "academia" are two distinct worlds, with different aims and perhaps most importantly, different languages. It is not important for practitioners to read academic journals. Informing happens through other forum, chiefly executive education programs, and in a more continuous way through the classroom (e.g., through textbooks and dissemination of research findings in class).

The third view is similar to the second with the key distinction that practitioners should read academic research. We in academia should do all we can to make this possible and to make our findings more directly palatable for practitioners. The current state of affairs is therefore a matter of concern. In this debate, some of my colleagues even question how much of the material in textbooks is based on academic research findings.

III. MY VIEWS

I take the third view. I think the problem goes beyond relevance. It has to do with the practitioners' perception that academics are out of touch with what is interesting and the important. One can be addressing a relevant issue (e.g., how to gain the competency to benefit from e-business) in a totally uninteresting way (rigorous but artificial setting, or with an objective of solely maximising theoretical yield) and focusing on the less important aspects (what can be studied).

Yet, I believe that academic research, even of the type described as basic, plays a key role in informing practice, and is "seeped" to practice in a variety of ways. We inform practice through interacting with practitioners, and gaining their attention and ultimately their respect. Much of this respect comes from our knowledge. While we can spout off statistics and pronouncements based on superficial - or even somewhat deep - reading and thinking, the true worth comes from thinking and reflecting on things that are new and/or newly perceived. These ideas come from research findings. What better way to engage in this task than doing research ourselves?

My concern about academic research being irrelevant comes from what I perceive to be the rather dismissive view of some of my colleagues about the need for relevance. Doing research just for the sake of doing it, or as some intellectual exercise is not productive and may prove to be self-defeating in the long run.

However, I also believe that learning and knowledge have a societal aspect. It is not important for everyone in practice to read academic research, nor for every academic to engage in directly relevant research. In course of this debate, other colleagues have suggested several excellent ways for relevant academic research, such as development research perhaps combined with action research. If we take a societal view of knowledge, as long as a segment of practice reads academic research and a segment of academia does relevant research, the knowledge becomes available to the community. Even "basic" research or interpretative or "understanding" research is relevant because it serves to inform those academics who do the more "relevant" research.

I believe that we should encourage and reward publications aimed at practitioners. However, I do not believe that it should replace academic research, nor should it be viewed and rewarded on an equal basis. We are academics first, and a vital part of our mission is to create knowledge, not

simply disseminate knowledge. Our job is taking a critical approach to research findings. We cannot let un-moderated writings nor un-reviewed articles become part of the field's knowledge. Writing in practitioner outlets should complement, not supplement academic publications.

Another aspect of relevance is the answer to the question: "whose relevance". I agree that almost the entire body of IS literature is geared towards business organisations. There is a greater world out there, the public sector, government, not-for-profit organisations and the community in general. The latter incorporates the global community, and I believe that information technology has a role in development of nations. These areas are relevant, interesting and important. IS research should, and indeed has an obligation to address them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maung K. Sein is Professor of Information Systems at Agder University College, Norway. Previously, he taught at Georgia State, Florida International, and Indiana Universities, USA. His main research interests are end-user training, conceptual database and systems design, and IT and national development. His publications appear in such journals as *Information Systems Research*, *MIS Quarterly*, *CACM*, and, *Human-Computer Interaction* and he has written for the practitioner audience. His current and past editorial board memberships include *MIS Quarterly*, *E-Service Journal* and *Communications of the AIS*. He co-guest-edited a special issue of *CACM*. Prior to his academic incarnation, he worked in industry as a service engineer, systems analyst/designer, and consultant.

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