Communications of the Association for Information Systems

Volume 6 Article 25

March 2001

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Recommended Citation
Weinberg, Paul (2001) "Relevance of MIS Research to the Business Community," *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 6 , Article 25.
DOI: 10.17705/1CAIS.00625
Available at: https://aisel.aisnet.org/cais/vol6/iss1/25

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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

RELEVANCE OF MIS RESEARCH TO THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Having recently moved from the business world to academia, my impressions regarding MIS research changed. Initially questioning the relevance of MIS research to the business community, I conclude that MIS research can be very relevant, given the use of appropriate metrics.

I. BACKGROUND

It is often helpful in reading a position paper, to understand a bit about the background of the writer. I recently joined a large Northeastern research institution as an executive in residence and senior fellow after over 25 years in senior management positions at large financial services organizations. I was not unfamiliar with academia. I hold a PhD in Computer Science, served as an adjunct faculty member for over 10 years, and actively participated in successful collaborations with universities.

I was somewhat skeptical about the relevance of MIS research. Several years ago, a business colleague gave me several issues of MISQ, which he had not read, hoping that I could make some use of them. After attempting to read a few articles, I put the journals aside, using them to fill empty spaces in my bookcases (and impress visiting academics). They were never removed from the bookcase, and were joined by additional issues, sent to me by my colleague. The research appeared to be focused on issues that were far removed from those I faced, both with respect to strategy and practice. I was wrong. MIS research can be relevant to the business community and often is. MIS journals are not written for business readers, nor should they be.

II. A DEFINITION OF BUSINESS RELEVANCE

As several contributors to the ISWorld discussion noted, the business perspective about relevant research is usually related to the impact of the research on short-term business results. For example, the research will be considered to be relevant from a business perspective, if the application of the findings results in:

- Improved customer service
- Increased market share
- Reduced costs
- Market differentiation

Relevance of research implying longer term results can be established, if the related business case can be made for an investment which includes the cost of the front-end research.

III. DIFFICULTIES ESTABLISHING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND METRICS OF RELEVANCE

I believe that the connection between these factors and the findings of MIS research is not immediately obvious, short term or long term. Therefore, the relevance of MIS research can be challenged incorrectly. Some of my reasons are:

- A distinct effort is often necessary to develop business interpretations and communicate research results.
- Research often results in abstract findings, which have to be applied to the solution of specific business problems.
- Research applicability may be limited to new business models, with potentially cross-existing business boundaries, and therefore may not be recognized as valid by business practitioners.
- Research may result primarily in future gains, beyond the current business planning horizon.

For example:

- As contributors to the discussion noted, the development of the Internet by DARPA did not significantly impact businesses for several decades. Few would have included it on their relevance list for twenty years.
- Research in extensible computer languages can potentially result in substantial improvements in healthcare claims adjudication. But, the linkage between theory and practice has to be established, and communicated.
- A securities trader, would probably not consider an abstraction that links their processing and data structures to banking and insurance. Yet, the appropriate interpretation of this abstraction resulted in significant service innovations in the past decade.

IV. FALSE MEASURES

The relevance of research should not be measured by the business readership of MIS journals or business attendance at MIS conferences. The goal of these journals and conferences is communication of research results in the academic community. The requirements for this communication process are different from the interpretation of the results and the presentation of their implications to the business (practice) community. It is not surprising that the Larry Press survey determined that MISQ and JAIS are preferred sources for research articles, while InfoWorld, Network World, and ComputerWorld are preferred sources for consulting articles.

V. INTEGRATING THE FINDINGS OF OTHER DISCIPLINES

It is reasonable for MIS research to integrate findings originating in other disciplines, and provide the linkage with business results. The MIS community can play a key role in the integration of multiple disciplines, producing results which will impact businesses significantly. It doesn't matter that original research was reported in a CIS journal if the business applicability is established and tested in the MIS community.

VI.CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, I ignored the quality of MIS research. Like any other field, there is good and bad research. Some people do publish with the primary objective of survival. But MIS research can be very relevant to the business community. The key is leveraging the academic perspective, and the interpretation of results using communication media appropriate for business people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Weinberg is a Senior Fellow in Temple University's eBusiness Institute and a Fox School Executive in Residence, serving as a member of the MIS faculty. Before joining Temple in 1999, Paul was a Senior Vice President of CIGNA Corporation, where he was responsible for the technology component of CIGNA's eCommerce strategy, focusing on the development of integrated benefits services. Paul's previous positions included heading managed healthcare systems at CIGNA, and administrative healthcare systems at AEtna. Paul received his Ph.D. in Computer and Information Sciences from the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a Moore School Research Fellow.

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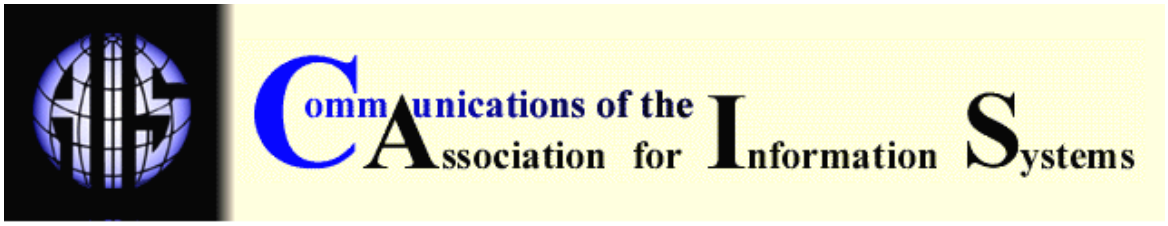

ISSN: 1529-3181

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