Panel 14 German Perspectives on Information Systems: Research Topics, Methodological Challenges, and Patterns of Exchange with IS Practice

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GERMAN PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION SYSTEMS:
RESEARCH TOPICS, METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES,
AND PATTERNS OF EXCHANGE WITH IS PRACTICE

Chair: Ulrich Frank, Universität Koblenz
Panelists: Hans Ulrich Buhl, Universität Augsburg
Wolfgang Koenig, Universität Frankfurt
Helmut Krcmar, Universität Hohenheim
Peter Mertens, Universität Saarbrücken

Comments: Bob Zmud, Florida State University
Heinz K. Klein, Binghamton University

The German term for IS research and teaching is „Wirtschaftsinformatik“. Wirtschaftsinformatik has been taught at universities in German speaking countries for almost 30 years. While it originates in management science and business and administration (“Betriebswirtschafts-lehre”), it has adopted methods and results from other disciplines as well—especially from computer science. The purpose of this panel is to give an overview of current research activities and of methodological questions being discussed within the IS community in Germany. To enrich the discussion with a non-German perspective, two researchers from the United States, Bob Zmud and Heinz K. Klein, comment on the presentations of their German colleagues.

PROFILE/RESEARCH TOPICS

Despite its productive research community, it is not too daring to state that Wirtschaftsinformatik in general has so far not found a coherent academic profile of its own. Peter Mertens gives an overview of the current situation and comments on the growth of knowledge within the discipline in the past. He advises against running after the dernier cri of data processing all the time. Instead, he demands a coherent and continuous orientation toward a common, long range research goal.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Wolfgang Koenig argues that an interdisciplinary orientation is an essential prerequisite for IS research to cope with the diversity of its field. However, it remains a challenge to combine the perspectives of different disciplines into a coherent methodology. Referring to his experience with interdisciplinary research projects, he suggests a number of measures to foster a productive working atmosphere.

Within the German IS community there are three dominant methodological orientations. One stresses an engineering approach. It aims at developing and testing software prototypes, including the design and application of more or less formal modeling methods. Another focuses on organizational aspects of introducing and using information systems. The third approach aims at the development and analysis of formal models in order to support optimization and decision making in general. Often, IS researchers feel committed to one approach exclusively. Helmut Krcmar
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postulates that IS needs variety in methods: Depending on the goals and constraints of a particular project, appropriate methods should be combined in a balanced way.

Beyond the selection and application of methods, research projects require an appropriate organization. Hans Ulrich Buhl suggests a team-oriented approach to organize IS research at universities, both within IS departments of/between German universities and with partners from industry. He claims that it satisfies the participating business firms and contributes to valuable research results, while at the same time it is suited to keeping a profile that clearly distinguishes IS research institutions from e.g. consulting firms.

RELATIONSHIP WITH IS PRACTICE

Developing adequate strategies for cooperating with business firms will become more relevant in the future. First, there is growing pressure to acquire funds from outside the university. Second, public funding of research projects has put more emphasis on the commercial exploitation of research results.

August-Wilhelm Scheer describes his experience with public funding as well as with transferring research prototypes into successful software products. He argues that more IS academics should become entrepreneurs in their field, both for the benefit of research and its practical exploitation.