AT THE JUNCTION BETWEEN INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND PEOPLE INTERACTING IN ORGANIZATIONS

Business Methods Patents

Networks of Practice

Electronic Marketplaces

The Internet and Strategic Advantage

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V
olume six leads with four articles that showcase some of the diversity in serious IS research today. All four could be considered to address behavioral or economic issues that result from the use of systems in work and business. Hunter’s (2004) paper is at the cusp of law, management, and IS. Wasko and Teigland (2004) resides more in the neighborhood near the edge of pure social science. Kontolemakis, Kanellis, and Martakos (2004) could be seen over by the junction of economics and computer science. Evans and Smith (2004) clearly strays into the territory of strategic management. All four, however, lay claim to being information systems research and all have something important to tell us about the interaction of people, organizations, and systems.

Starling Hunter (2004) focuses on business method patents to determine whether they are overly broad and whether they overlook prior art, as critics have complained, to patent existing methods that have simply been repackaged as information systems features. Several famous cases have provided anecdotal evidence of the poor quality of business method patents, notably Amazon’s action against Barnes & Noble, Amazon, which was held to have neglected to cite a prior service feature developed by Compuserve, and E-Bay’s alleged infringement on another, earlier, patent. Business methods patents are not new, however, their use has become increasingly important as methods, incorporated into information systems, can result in distinct advantages to the firm, as effective, innovative behavior and technique are replicated at low cost and protected from imitation.

Hunter (2004) tests whether business methods patents cite less prior art than other patents and whether their scope is broader than other patents. The study uses data collected on 3 million patents and 16 million patent citations. This study should be of interest to those interested in public policy about business methods patents. It should also be very interesting to those interested in the state of business methods patents, as well as those interested generally in the intersection between law and information systems.

Molly Wasko and Robin Teigland (2004) study online social structures in ‘networks of practice.’ A network of practice is a relatively weak network of individuals who are linked together voluntarily for the purpose of performing activities related to some shared practice. Membership is open to anyone engaged in the shared practice and the

network exists solely through computer mediated communications. The authors start by reviewing several relevant social science theories: public goods, social dilemmas, and collective action, which they then proceed to apply to this environment. They propose several models of interaction among the members, based on these theories, to help us understand how characteristics of the networks influence member knowledge contribution and network sustainability. The study should be of interest to researchers involved in the study of electronic communities, virtual organizations, and similar issues.

George Kontolemakis, Panagiotis Kanellis, and Drakoulis Martakos (2004) review the state of research with respect to the application of software agents in electronic market places. Software agents are increasingly important in the design of information systems, argue the authors, and can perform services such as searching, advising, and negotiating for users in electronic markets. The paper reviews the characteristics of electronic marketplaces, the role that agents can potentially fill in them, and the current and the potential research landscape. They proceed to develop a fairly extensive outline for future research in this area. They conclude that the research opportunities in this area are almost limitless and that it is still too early to be able to identify all of the promising avenues of research.

Daniel Evans and Aaron Smith (2004) review several models that could be used to describe the strategic impact of the Internet as a business channel. Their objective is to create a new perspective in a synthesis that they call the “Business Activity Model.” This augmented model, they argue, creates a useful concept with which to observe competitive advantage. Students of the growing stream of literature at the junction of the Internet and the value chain will appreciate this contribution.

These four papers are worth a look, whether your research interest lies in one of these areas or they are all areas that you haven’t visited in awhile.

REFERENCES


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