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Communications of the Association for Information Systems

RELEVANCE IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Information Systems as an academic discipline makes two contributions to society. The first, knowledge exploration, is the creation of new knowledge that is not -- and should not be -- relevant to today's practitioner. The goal of knowledge exploration is to change the future, not improve the present. The second, knowledge exploitation, is the dissemination of knowledge to serve current practice (and to train future practitioners, our students). While I believe we have done a good job of knowledge exploration, I believe we need develop new vehicles to promote, nurture, and validate knowledge exploitation much like our academic cousins in Medicine, Engineering, and Computer Science.

The debate over the relevance of academic research in the Information Systems community and the business school as a whole has a long history (AACSB, 1997). For much of the 20th century, most business schools focused on very practical and relevant applied research. The Carnegie report (Pierson, 1959) was highly critical of this focus, and provoked a sharp turn to more "scientific" research like that of our cousins in the Arts and Sciences. Almost 30 years later, the Porter-McKibbin report (1988) was highly critical of the focus on theoretical research, and argued for greater focus on research relevant to practitioners.

Over the last dozen years, we have seen many rapid changes and upheavals as new technologies have swept over organizations, and the research relevance debate resurfaced. Some believe that we as IS researchers watched from the sidelines rather than led these changes, and that our research is increasingly seen as irrelevant to the IS practitioners leading and responding to these changes.

I believe there is truth in this charge: much IS research is irrelevant to practice. So shouldn't we as a discipline rush to embrace greater relevance? Well, no and yes.

As a discipline, we make two distinct contributions to society: the creation of new knowledge (what March (1991) calls *knowledge exploration*) and the dissemination of knowledge for application (*knowledge exploitation* (March, 1991)). As such, we have two distinct constituencies that we serve:

1. practitioners (and practitioners-to-be: students) and
2. academics (D'Aveni, 1996).

Two distinct sub-cultures developed to serve these two constituencies: "the soldiers of organizational performance and the priests of research purity" (March and Sutton, 1997). The

priests of research purity are the explorers who create deep knowledge; their constituency is composed of like-minded academics. The soldiers of organizational performance are the exploiters who disseminate and apply that knowledge in the pursuit of improved organizational practice; their constituency is practitioners (and students).

There is a huge danger in wanting knowledge exploration to be relevant to today's practitioners; that is the job of consultants and other soldiers of organizational performance who make academic research "relevant" to today's practitioners. In 1967, Doug Engelbart produced some research at Stanford Research Institute that practitioners thought was not relevant. He had a hard time getting anyone to listen until eventually, five years later, Xerox become interested. The research was the windows and mouse interface. It was not relevant in 1967. It is very relevant today.

Somewhere, someone reading this article is working on research that is not relevant to today's practitioners, but in 20 years will be the foundation for a major part of practitioner's lives. However, 20 years from now, no one except a few academics will remember the individual's name; the world will simply remember the entrepreneur or consultant who made it famous.

And academic research will still be seen as irrelevant.

Our primary knowledge exploration mission is to be relevant to the future, not the present. This mission is our unique contribution to society; it is what sets us apart from practitioners. But of course, few of us will be relevant 20 years from now, but just because only a few research ideas cause paradigm shifts is no reason to decry the value of academic research.

Our challenge as a discipline is to manage the natural tension between exploration and exploitation. Focusing only on exploration (academic constituency) or exploitation (practitioner constituency) may prove valuable in the short run, but will be harmful to the discipline as whole in the long run. Pure exploration without an eye toward exploitation eventually forgets the point of exploration; pure exploitation without an eye toward exploration eventually loses its foundation for innovation and adaptation (March, 1991).

I believe that we as a discipline have done a good job in our knowledge exploration role. We have matured to the point where we have a set of well- recognized research journals that serve its target constituency of academics. However, I am less convinced about our success in knowledge exploitation. Some might argue that our historical approach of using degree programs, executive education, and consulting to focus on knowledge exploitation served us well and need not change. I disagree.

In response to the Carnegie report (Pierson, 1959) our predecessors turned to the Arts and Sciences as the model for building a strong Business School. We in Information Systems naturally adopted the model of our academic home as we built our discipline. Perhaps now is the time to look to other professional schools such as Medicine, Engineering, and Computer Science for new models of knowledge exploitation. Academics in these professional schools engage in many of the same knowledge exploration activities as we do, but are more active in knowledge exploitation by working with external organizations on projects focused in the near term.

I believe that we as a discipline need to develop new vehicles to promote, nurture, and validate knowledge exploitation, but not at the cost of our current knowledge exploration activities. Our cousins in Medicine, Engineering, and Computer Science have many such vehicles we should consider, but one possibility are journals whose mission is to promote and disseminate research that is more relevant to today's practitioners. Such journals would fit within the existing journal reward structure but offer new opportunities for those engaged in knowledge exploitation to disseminate more relevant knowledge.

In summary, it is important that we as a discipline balance the tension between knowledge exploration and knowledge exploitation. I believe that true IS research will always seem irrelevant

to today's practitioner, and that is a good thing because the goal of knowledge exploration is to change the future, not assist the present. However, I believe that we as a discipline can and should do a better job of knowledge exploitation by expanding our current activities to include more applied research that is more common in other professional schools.

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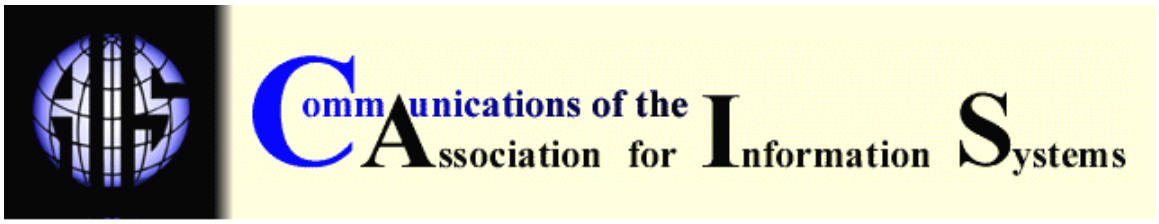

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