

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE IN MIS RESEARCH— INTRODUCTION

By: **Lynda M. Applegate**
Senior Editor

There is a crisis in the field of organizational science. The principal symptom of this crisis is that, as our research methods and techniques have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that members of organizations face.

(Susman and Everéd, 1978)

In this issue of *MIS Quarterly*, we are pleased to feature an important Issues and Opinions paper by Izak Benbasat and Bob Zmud, entitled "Empirical Research in Information Systems: The Practice of Relevance." In the opening paragraphs, the authors challenge the IS academic community to ask themselves the following questions:

- Does IS research produce the knowledge that today's IS professionals can apply in their daily work?
- Does it address the problems or challenges that are of concern to IS professionals?
- Does it focus on current technological and business issues?
- Are IS research articles accessible to professionals?

The authors go on to argue that, for much of the North American IS research published today, the answer to the above questions is "no."¹ While

not abandoning rigor, the authors make a strong plea for more relevance. The article discusses why a lack of relevance has occurred and offers guidelines that the IS academic community might follow, and tactics they might take, to increase the relevance of our research.

This article was submitted to *MISQ* at the same time as another Issues and Opinion article by Tom Davenport and Lynne Markus that addressed the same issues from a slightly different point of view. I asked Tom and Lynne to present their opinions as commentary on the paper by Izak and Bob. I also asked Kalle Lyytinen, a senior editor at *MISQ*, to provide his perspectives as a non-North American researcher. Finally, I asked Allen Lee, the current editor-in-chief of *MISQ*, to provide a set of closing comments. These alternative points of view are published along with the original article to sharpen the debate and deepen our understanding of this complex subject.

To actively participate in this debate, it is necessary to understand the issues and how to frame them. On the surface, it appears to be a simple dichotomy of rigor vs. relevance. Many believe that relevance is not built from a single study, but instead is carefully constructed as one adds "brick after brick to the wall of knowledge." Thus, the results of any single study may not appear relevant to practitioners who seek answers to broad questions. Benbasat and Zmud challenge this assumption, stating that rigor and relevance can coexist. Others argue that, at its core, the debate is not really about research rigor at all, but instead is centered on political power and institutional practices deeply embedded

¹The authors point out that they are speaking as two North American authors and do not attempt to speak for either the non-North American research community, nor do they speak for those IS researchers who employ "engineering" research methods.

within the academic field. As the debates rage on, careers hang in the balance.

To highlight the complexity of the issues, I have also included a case study that was originally written to accompany a paper that John King and I wrote and presented at the June 1997 meeting of Working Group 8.2 of the International Federation for Information

Processing.² The case, written from the perspective of an assistant professor, enables us to frame the issues raised in the papers and commentaries.

We hope you find this Issues and Opinions piece helpful as you address this timely and important issue in your own institutions.

²This case was originally published as part of a "hyper-text" paper: King, J.L. and Applegate, L.M. "Crisis in the Case Study Crisis: Marginal Diminishing Returns to Scale in the Quantitative-Qualitative Research Debate," *Information Systems and Qualitative Research*, A. Lee, J. Liebenau, and J. DeGross (eds.), Chapman Publishing, 1997. The paper and case are also available online at: www.hbs.edu/applegate/cases/research.