

Editor's Comments

MIS and Global Organizations

It has become commonplace to observe that successful organizations of the 1990s and beyond will have to survive in a world marketplace. Many organizations—in the United States perhaps more than in most countries—grew up in a relatively isolated world where global competition for resources and markets was not a major consideration. That has changed.

We need hardly to be reminded that tranquil domestic markets are largely a memory from the past. Ask Roger Smith. Customers now judge products and services by worldwide standards. Only world-class competitions can thrive in such an environment. The competition for resources—human talent, financial resources, raw materials, and the like—also takes place in a worldwide arena, often at electronic speeds. Even the local hospital and college are not immune from such competition. If a nation or organization is to preserve an advantageous standard of living or profitable growth, it must add sufficient value to its outputs to justify rewards in the global marketplace.

MIS practitioners and academics are bound to find themselves in the middle of the fray. As competition increases, organizations must seek ways to lower costs, increase quality, reduce product development cycles, and become more responsive to customer needs. The effective management of information technology will surely be one of the most fruitful means of striving for these goals.

In order to compete in the new age, far-flung operations will have to be coordinated quickly and effectively over a worldwide communications network. Decision making must take account of a whole set of new factors, such as monetary exchange rates, tariffs and import controls, monetary controls, differential tax effects, transfer prices across national boundaries, employment restrictions, and national sensitivities. As the scale and cost of international operations expand, organizations are likely to seek a variety of alliances to enter new markets, reduce risks, and gain access to new technology.

There is little hope for an organization to manage such complexity unless it has an effective information system: the MIS provides the glue that ties it all together. These developments will inevitably have a major impact across the whole IS spectrum, from MIS executives to systems designers.

MIS executives face a new set of concerns as their organizations become more international in scope. The implementation and operation of an information system distributed across the world gives a new meaning to the old concepts of hardware, software, and operating standards. The provision of technical support across vast space with different time zones, languages, cultures, and business practices is enough of a challenge for any manager. It is hard to see how the senior MIS manager of the future will be able to cope with such variety without acquiring the kind of seasoning that can only come from assignments outside of the firm's domestic operations.

Designers of information systems will increasingly have to recognize that they are in a new world. They must routinely deal with such heretofore unfamiliar details as recording transactions in multiple currencies and handling strange postal codes. The costs and reliability of international communication links, as well as restrictions on transborder data flow, add considerable complexity to network design.

The MIS academic community has already experienced substantial changes as the profession becomes more globally oriented. Increasing emphasis is placed on developing teaching materials with an international perspective. A number of U.S. business schools have developed partnership arrangements with schools in other countries, encouraging the exchange of faculty and students. The International Conference on Information Systems, the premier annual meeting of MIS academics, has a heavy international representation in recent years. For the first time, this year's meeting is being held outside the U.S., in Copenhagen, giving real substance to the claim of being an international forum.

The internationalization of the IS student body has moved apace over the past decade. It is not uncommon for half or more of the students in U.S. graduate MIS programs to come from foreign countries (which is not unique, of course, to the MIS field). As the number of foreign alumni has grown, some schools have been aggressive in promoting alumni clubs around the world. Relatively little academic

research has been done on the international aspects of MIS, but this is likely to change as business schools place increasing emphasis on global issues.

In dealing with globalization, one could focus on either the differences or similarities between domestic and international information systems. It is another case of the half-full/half-empty glass: it is largely a matter of perspective.

For my taste, I prefer to focus on similarities rather than differences. We must aim, I believe, at developing a general understanding of the important issues in implementing and operating management information systems. The article by Tony Moynihan in this issue, for instance, speaks of the universality of the chief issues facing senior managers in applying information technology. The domestic versus international dimension should be simply another "parameter" in the general view of information systems. It would certainly be a surprise, and not a little upsetting, if we were to find that most of our understanding of MIS goes out the window as we move to international organizations.

The transition to international information systems should be viewed as a continuation of a long-standing trend toward broader boundaries of corporate systems. Many companies have long since moved from an isolated central system to one having communication links among scattered offices and plants within the domestic market. We are now witnessing a rapid growth in such links across organizational boundaries—among buyers, sellers, and government agencies, for example. Effective MIS organizations have learned to support distributed systems serving a wide variety of clients around the country. They understand, if they are at all smart, that supporting diverse groups having quite different backgrounds requires a sensitivity to cultural differences. They understand, too, that a proper balance must be struck between the benefits of a productive infrastructure managed by the central staff and the preservation of freedom for users to get their work done.

To be sure, for reasons discussed earlier, moving to the international arena certainly changes things considerably. Life becomes more complex, more varied, and faster paced. But what's new about that? It's more a matter of degree than kind. MIS groups that have managed to be effective in domestic operations are likely to cope well with expanded worldwide responsibilities.

Not to be caught napping while these momentous changes take place, members of the editorial board of the *MIS Quarterly* support a movement toward greater international representation on the board. Accordingly, we have appointed five new associate editors from countries other than the U.S.: Gad Ariav, Tel Aviv University; Niels Bjorn-Andersen, Copenhagen School of Economics and Business Administration; Frank Land, London Business School; Hans Oppelland, Erasmus University in Rotterdam; and Suzanne Rivard, Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales in Montreal. These appointments recognize the globalization of the MIS field and the growing number of papers submitted by non-U.S. authors—not to mention the distinguished contributions of the new editors themselves.

* * * * *

In addition to the international group, we have other new appointments to the *Quarterly* editorial board: Timothy Paul Cronan, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; Miles Kennedy, Case Western Reserve University; Kenneth Kozar, University of Colorado, Boulder; and Allen Lee, Northeastern University.

This issue also sees the departure of three associate editors: Eric Clemons, University of Pennsylvania; Thomas Malone, M.I.T.; and Dennis Severance, University of Michigan.

I would like to thank the departing editors for their past service, as well as the incoming editors for their willingness to take on the demanding duties of an *MISQ* editor.

James C. Emery

* * * * *

For those of you not aware of it, the *MIS Quarterly* and the MIS Research Center have a new BITNET address: **MISRC@UMNSOM**. The old BITNET address, **MISRC@UMNACVX**, will be discontinued after May 31.